

Thomas Jefferson and the Culture Wars of Religion

How the Sage of Monticello Became the Hero of Conservatives and Liberals Alike in the Battle over Religion in America

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**“I never considered a difference of
opinion in politics, in religion, in
philosophy, as cause for
withdrawing from a friend.”**

Thomas Jefferson

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CHAPTER 1

Jeffersonian Inspiration for Conservatives and Liberals Alike

In his 2012 foreword to David Barton's controversial book *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson*, right wing media personality Glenn Beck states that, "progressive secularists" have tried very hard for several decades to "keep religion entirely separate from the government." Beck then goes on to claim that Thomas Jefferson has falsely been labeled as a secularist. Moreover, Beck asserts that, "our important Founding Father" has been used by liberals to move Americans one step closer to "surrendering our birthright and our natural freedoms."¹ Such a view of Thomas Jefferson and of the liberal misuse and misinterpretation of him is not uncommon among the religious right.

Nevertheless, it is not just polemic right wing demagogues like Beck who present such claims. The conservative Heritage Foundation's academic heavyweight, the distinguished Professor Daniel L. Dreisbach, claims that Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state is a "misused metaphor," which has "changed church-state law, policy, and discourse." To the Heritage Foundation, Jefferson understood the "wall of separation as a matter of federalism," not of separation between church and state on all levels of American government.² Dr. Jerry Newcombe writes in the *The Christian Post* that, "there seems to be an ongoing onslaught against our Judeo-Christian traditions and beliefs. It's happening on virtually every front in our culture – in schools, in the media and movies, in the public arena ... Virtually all of this is done, consciously or unconsciously, in the name of Thomas Jefferson." In Newcombe's opinion there is a huge difference between what Jefferson actually meant by the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" and what liberal secularists, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), think it means: "In short, the Thomas Jefferson of the ACLU is an historical fiction." To Newcombe, it is

¹ Glenn Beck, foreword to *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012) by David Barton, vii-viii.

² Daniel L. Dreisbach, "The Mythical 'Wall of Separation': How a Misused Metaphor Changed Church-State Law, Policy, and Discourse," *Heritage.org*, June 23, 2006, accessed November 8, 2014. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/06/the-mythical-wall-of-separation-how-a-misused-metaphor-changed-church-state-law-policy-and-discourse>

ironic that the “anti-God crusade ... is done in the name of Thomas Jefferson,” when Jefferson clearly was not opposed to religion in the public square.³

At the other end of the political spectrum, however, Thomas Jefferson is just as popular and deeply cherished. During a visit to Thomas Jefferson’s home Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia, on February 10, 2014, President Barack Obama told his guest, French President François Hollande: “As one of our Founding Fathers, the person who drafted our Declaration of Independence, somebody who not only was an extraordinary political leader but also one of our great scientific and cultural leaders, Thomas Jefferson represents what’s best in America.”⁴ Ed Buckner of the Council for Secular Humanism asserts that, “those who want to pretend that Jefferson's commitment to liberty is a limited (pro-religious or pro-Christian or ‘one-directional’) commitment are clearly mistaken.”⁵

Clearly, Thomas Jefferson is an important figure to all parts of the political landscape in today’s America. Religious liberty and church-state issues make up an area of public debate where Jefferson is perhaps called upon the most by conservatives and liberals alike. In order to add strength to arguments on both sides, Jefferson is referred to as the hero of religious freedom. However, the understanding of what religious freedom means, vary greatly between various groups.

When it comes to debates over the role of religion in American society, the War on Christmas is a struggle where Jefferson appears to be the favorite Founding Father of all parts of the political landscape. To what degree the public square should be an arena where celebrations of the Christian holiday is a hotly debated topic, which has even resulted in a few landmark court cases such as *Lynch v. Donnelly*. Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly leads the charge on what he calls the “secularist progressive agenda” to root out religion from the public sphere, and particularly when it comes to the celebration of Christmas. Whether or not religious expressions, such the singing of Christmas carols in public schools or government support of Christmas parades or nativity scenes, are in line with the Constitution and the ideas of the Founding Fathers, particularly Jefferson, is at the center of the War on Christmas debate.

³ Jerry Newcombe, “Misunderstanding Thomas Jefferson on Church and State,” in *The Christian Post*, November 5, 2014, accessed November 9, 2012. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/misunderstanding-thomas-jefferson-on-church-and-state-129209/>

⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France After Touring Thomas Jefferson's Monticello,” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, February 10, 2014, accessed November 9, 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/10/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france-after-touring-thom>

⁵ Ed Buckner, “200 Years and Counting. Thomas Jefferson’s Famous ‘Wall of Separation between Church and State’ Letter,” in *Secular Humanist Bulletin*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2002).

Another battle where having the Founders and the Constitution on your side seems to be the main argument of both sides, is the teaching of American history and what role religion should play in public education. In Texas, the State Board of Education is a battlefield where the religious right have been seeking to change the curricula of history and social studies so that the idea of America being founded as a Christian nation – not a secular, non-religious state where the separation of church and state is an essential principle – will be taught in public schools. During these textbook wars in Texas in 2010, when the history and social studies curricula were up for revision, the issue of how Thomas Jefferson and religious liberty should be presented sparked controversy and fierce struggles between conservatives and liberals. Thus, the teaching of history became an obviously political affair. The attempts of remodeling history to make it fit with the current thinking of one particular political and religious group is an excellent example of how important the American Revolution and the intentions of the Founders are as political tools to influence the public in present-day America.

The American Creed and American Exceptionalism

The Constitution and the Founders are very important to most Americans and the values and ideals they represent are conceivably the very core of Americanism. Throughout American history, Thomas Jefferson and his ideas has been referred to as the epitomization of the American Creed. Abraham Lincoln harkened back to Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence in the Gettysburg Address.⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did the same in his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963.⁷ And, more recently, Barack Obama referred to Jefferson in his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.⁸ As Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election, he stated in his victory speech in Chicago that “the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope,” which reiterates the words of Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.⁹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the building of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C. and on its

⁶ Abraham Lincoln, “Address at the Dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania” in *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=73959&st=gettysburg&st1=>

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream...” Speech at the “March on Washington,” 1963 in *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*. <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

⁸ Barack Obama, “Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” in *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76988>

⁹ Obama, “Address in Chicago Accepting Election as the 44th President of the United States,” in *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=84750>

opening on April 13, 1943 said: “Today, in the midst of a great war for freedom, we dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, Apostle of Freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue.”¹⁰ Hence, to many great American leaders, the democratic and republican ideals of the Founding Fathers – and of Thomas Jefferson in particular – are at the very center of what it has meant to be American at different times and what it should mean in the future.

Historian and Jefferson biographer Joseph Ellis points out that the moment when Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial was when Jefferson was made “an American saint.” According to Ellis, Jefferson “guards the American Creed” at an “inspirational level, which is inherently immune to scholarly skepticism.” Furthermore, Ellis emphasizes how Jefferson is a figure that inspires all parts of the political spectrum:

American citizens can come together in Jefferson’s presence and simultaneously embrace the following propositions: that abortion is a woman’s right and that an unborn child cannot be killed; that health care and a clean environment for all Americans are natural rights and that the federal bureaucracies and taxes required to implement medical and environmental programs violate individual independence; that women and black must not be denied their rights as citizens and that affirmative action programs violate the principle of equality. The primal source of Jefferson’s modern-day appeal is that he provides the sacred space – not really common ground but more a midair location floating above all the political battle lines – where all Americans can come together and, at least for that moment, become a chorus instead of a cacophony.¹¹

Subsequently, it is clear that Jefferson is *the* American hero: Everyone’s favorite Founding Father, who is completely relevant and inspiring to present-day Americans in a way that most other historical characters simply are not capable of. Jefferson seems to transcend time, and has become more widely celebrated the more time that has passed since his own day. The most commonly known part of Jefferson’s legacy is his role as the author of the Declaration of Independence, which in effect sums up the American Creed. Thus Jefferson becomes the source of what most Americans believe to be the essence of Americanism, no matter how different their opinions of what that actually means might be.

¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address at the Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, Washington, D.C.” in *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16383>

¹¹ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books. 1998), 9-12.

In renowned historian Richard Hofstadter's opinion "it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one."¹² The United States was born as a result of a particular ideology stemming from the advancement of the Enlightenment. Historian and one of the most distinguished experts on the American Revolution, Gordon S. Wood, highlights this: "After eighteenth-century Americans threw off their monarchical allegiance in 1776, they struggled to find new attachments befitting a republican people. Living in a society that was already diverse and pluralistic, Americans realized that these attachments could not be the traditional ethnic, religious, and tribal loyalties of the Old World."¹³ Consequently, democratic and republican principles set forth by the Founders are what make America unique and contribute to the feeling of being an American, not ancient culture, ethnicity, or religion as in many European countries. Wood argues that the American Revolution was not just an intellectual revolution that simply replaced monarchy with a constitutional republic: "It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world."¹⁴ Thus, Wood is onboard with the idea that there is such a thing as American Exceptionalism, and that the American Revolution and the work of the Founders did in fact make the United States unique and created a New World different from that of the European Old World.

According to Seymour Martin Lipset, Hofstadter's remark alludes to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Lincoln's idea of how becoming an American was a "religious, that is, ideological act."¹⁵ Moreover, Lipset claims that "the American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire Egalitarianism."¹⁶ Several scholars, however, refute the idea of the American Creed. To them, the Enlightenment ideology of the Revolution cannot be so important in creating political and social change because it is simply too abstract. Joseph Ellis states that "a host of otherwise intelligent commentators, following the lead of Gunnar Myrdal in *An American Dilemma* (1943)," have asserted the significance of the ideas of what Myrdal called the American Creed, and that "not only is it rather preposterous to believe an abstract idea can perform such a massive social function, but it flies in the face of all we know about the historical Jefferson to make him an advocate of racial equality or the modern-day multiracial

¹² Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism – A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 18.

¹³ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), ix.

¹⁴ Wood, 7.

¹⁵ Lipset, 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

ideal.”¹⁷ Even though Ellis makes a good argument, the Founding Fathers and their abstract ideas are valued to a large extent by the average American. No matter what discrepancies one can find between the abstract ideas put forth by the Founders and their actions, their ideas can transcend their own time and find new meaning in society in different time periods.

David W. Noble describes very well how the idea of American Exceptionalism lost much of its significance with what he calls the “1960s revolutionists” of American Studies, who rebelled against the traditions of their scholarly field being centered on the nation-state and the belief that America was exceptional. The revolutionists, Noble writes, rejected what they felt was the “erroneous tradition begun by the men who led the American Revolution in 1776” of scholarly studies of America up to this point. These post-nationalist scholars of the 1960s saw “class stratification” and general international developments as far more important angles to study America from, and that “class inequities had been obscured by the gender and racial prejudices” of the privileged, white, protestant, male Founders. Thus, the post-nationalists viewed American Exceptionalism as a flawed tradition that did not take into consideration the struggles of the working class, women, Native Americans, African Americans, and other marginalized groups. For the Founders, “citizenship needed to be the exclusive privilege of white males, who alone were capable of rational maturity.”¹⁸

Even though it is a very good point that the previous traditions of scholarship did not acknowledge class, gender, and racial issues of American history to a large enough extent and instead focused more on prominent white men mostly from the upper classes – who were all men of their time and thus held views and acted in ways that today seem contradictory to the ideals that are now part of the American Creed – the importance of these ideals and the work of the Founders cannot just be ignored or made to seem almost irrelevant to the development of modern society simply because they were not perfect by today’s standards. Thomas Jefferson was a slaveholder himself, but still penned the Declaration of Independence, asserting “that all men are created equal” and even wrote a section against slavery in his draft of the declaration, blaming the British king for introducing it to America.¹⁹ However, as we all know, Jefferson’s criticism of slavery would not make it into the final version of the Declaration of Independence. Even more so, in his instruction notes Virginia’s delegation to the First Continental Congress, Jefferson asserted that “the rights of

¹⁷ Ellis, 356.

¹⁸ David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson, “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled,” in *Autobiography in Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 19-22.

human nature are deeply wounded by this infamous practice” as well as claiming that “the abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state.”²⁰ Believing that slavery was wrong, Jefferson never freed his own slaves, but argued in his older days that emancipation was an issue not for the revolutionary generation to solve, but for the younger generation.²¹ He believed, perhaps out of pragmatism, that the best he could do was “to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine”²² as the virtuous patriarch at Monticello. Thus we can see that Jefferson was both a complex figure and a man of his own time, but at the same time his ideas lay the foundation for the American Creed that is still so important to many Americans today.

In *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn claim that focusing on marginalized groups in new, multicultural history-writing is not causing fragmentation and confusion, but that it instead tells “the story of the uncompleted project of making Americanism.”²³ Consequently, the American Creed is constantly being remolded to make sense for various groups and individuals in diverse settings. The ideals of the American Revolution will most likely never be fully completed, and as a result there will always be a struggle to fulfill those ideals:

Rather than triumphally saluting a completed national agenda and celebrating an undiluted record of achievement, a new synthesis of the old and new history presents multicultural nation and a continuously replenished immigrant society engaged in a ceaseless and often bittersweet crusade to narrow the gap between principles enunciated in charter documents and the actual conditions of life.²⁴

Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that one has to both acknowledge the exceptionalism of the American Revolution, as well as the fact that it was never perfect and is not yet completed. The American Creed is the essential part of Americanism, and the ideals of that Creed must be reinterpreted for each generation. As Thomas Jefferson himself put it, “the earth belongs usufruct to the living.”²⁵

²⁰ Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 115.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1343-1346.

²² Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Schuyler Church, November 27, 1793, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1013.

²³ Gary B. Nash et al, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 101.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 959.

The Culture Wars and the Role of Religion in American Society

Harvard history professor Jill Lepore calls attention to the political phenomenon of claiming that the American Revolution, the Constitution, and the Founders are all on your side: “When in doubt, in American politics, left, right, or center, deploy the Revolution.”²⁶ According to Lepore, this is not something new, but goes back to before the Revolution had even ended. The Federalists as well as the Anti-Federalists, the Union as well as the Confederacy, southern segregationists as well as Martin Luther King, Jr. all claimed the Revolution was on their side.²⁷ However, these lines of reasoning that harkened back to the Revolution used to be analogies. Lepore suggests that since 2009, the Tea Party movement and neo-conservatives in American politics have taken everything a few steps further to what she describes as “anti-intellectual,” “antihistorical,” and “historical fundamentalism,” which involves looking at the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as “sacred texts,” the Founding Fathers as “prophets,” and the “academic study of history” as a “conspiracy.”²⁸

The War on Christmas is of course just a small part of the bigger and never-ending discussion about the role of religion in American society. What this recent debate on the War on Christmas illustrates very well is the divide between conservative and liberal conceptions of what it means to be an American and what the core values of American society ought to be. This is part of the larger Culture Wars, which James Davidson Hunter defined as the struggle between the right and the left to control America. According to Hunter, there are two major “competing moral visions” of what the American national identity was, is, and “should aspire to become in the future.” There is the “orthodox vision,” today most fervently promoted by the neo-conservatives, which builds on a long tradition of “Evangelical Protestant account of the nation’s founding.” This vision claims that the United States is a Christian nation, built on Christian ideals and that the Founding Fathers were inspired and directed by God. Furthermore, the Constitution is looked at as an eternal truth, interpreted in the same literal way that the Biblicists of the religious right interpret the Bible. On the other side of the Culture Wars, Hunter points out, there is the “progressivist vision,” which emphasizes the creation of a “secular, humanistic state.” According to the progressivists, the Founding Fathers gave us a “living Constitution, one that cannot be straightjacketed, forever attached to the culture of an agrarian, preindustrialized society, but one that grows and

²⁶ Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 14.

²⁷ Ibid, 23.

²⁸ Ibid, 14-16.

changes with a changing society.”²⁹ In *History on Trial*, Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn write about the struggle over how to portray American history in public education as a part of the Culture Wars. According to Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, there was never “an agreed-upon story” of the American Revolution: “Revising the Revolution began approximately one day after the Paris Peace Treaty was signed on September 3, 1783. The revisions will continue as long as Americans – and people around the world – see that the revolutionary ideology echoes across the centuries, speaks to their own aspirations, and matters to their own times.”³⁰ This fits right into the discussion between Palin and Lynn about the War on Christmas, as well as battles over how to portray the American Creed and what role to give religion in public schools. The meaning of the American Revolution is very different to different groups and individuals at different times, and it is continuously changing.

It is evident that both the War on Christmas and the clash over textbook standards in Texas are excellent examples of issues that are part of what Hunter defined as the Culture War. What makes this more difficult, however, is the question if the Culture War is encompassing a majority of Americans who feel that there is a lot at stake, or if the Culture War is merely a battle between the most conservative and most liberal wings of American culture, who also tend to be the most politically active and aggressive towards their opponents. The latter is what Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope claim in the book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. The answer is perhaps somewhere in between. Fiorina has gathered statistics, which show that most Americans are fairly moderate and that they do not hold very strong opinions on for example homosexuality, abortion, or gun control. According to Fiorina, the opinions and positions of Americans are not “more polarized than they were two or three decades ago, although their *choices* often seem to be ... A polarized political class makes the citizenry appear polarized, but it is largely that – an appearance.”³¹

Even if Fiorina was completely right and most Americans are fairly moderate, it is still clear that American politics and media are perhaps more polarized than ever. Thus, there does exist a phenomenon called the Culture Wars and it holds sway over public debate and politics in America. In the Culture Wars, there is a deeply divided conflict between conservatives and liberals over who understands the American Creed better. Essentially, the Culture Wars is a conflict over what it means to be an American. It is conceivable that since

²⁹ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 108-114.

³⁰ Nash et al, 18.

³¹ Fiorina, Morris P. et. al, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (Boston: Longman, 2011), 9.

Jefferson is *the* American icon, as Ellis puts it, then both sides of the Culture Wars call upon the third president to convince moderate Americans that either the conservative or liberal vision for America is the correct one.

Thomas Jefferson and the Role of Religion in American Society

When describing American Exceptionalism and religion, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in America even religion is republican, where “every man is allowed freely to take that road which he thinks will lead him to heaven, just as the law permits every citizen to have the right of choosing his own government.”³² Moreover, Americans are by far the most religiously active people of the developed countries of the world today. Religion is also very important to Americans. According to a survey done by the Pew Research Center, 59% of Americans say that religion is very important to them.³³ Therefore there is an interesting connection between the ideals of the American Revolution and different perspectives on the freedom of religion in contemporary American society.

Since the principles and ideals of the American Revolution are so important to what it means to be an American, it is understandable that both conservatives and liberals are inspired by these, and interpret them in light of their own agendas. It is this process that this thesis will focus on, and more specifically this process in relation to Thomas Jefferson, possibly the most influential Founder when it comes to religious freedom, the relationship between church and state, and the role of religion in American society in general. Lipset emphasizes that “American values are quite complex, particularly because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs.”³⁴

Given that the values of the American Creed can lead to paradoxical results, it is perhaps fitting that one of the greatest Founding Fathers was himself quite paradoxical. Jefferson biographer Alf J. Mapp, Jr. stresses the inconsistency between Jefferson’s ideals and his actions when it came to slavery as the most blaring paradox of all, but that it is also “no less paradoxical in the fact that Jefferson is claimed as a patron saint by both liberals and conservatives in American politics.”³⁵ Thomas Jefferson is such an important figure, whose ideas and achievements have inspired – and keep inspiring – all parts of the political

³² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1994), volume 1, 418.

³³ Carol J. Doherty (ed.), “Among Wealthy Nations... U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion,” accessed January 9 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/167.pdf>

³⁴ Lipset, 267.

³⁵ Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson: America’s Paradoxical Patriot* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 2.

landscape. Jefferson's religious beliefs – just as his views and ideas on many other topics – are nuanced, complex, and perhaps at times somewhat paradoxical. Thus, it is no surprise that Jefferson is claimed to belong to various religious or non-religious belief systems by people who admire Jefferson so much that they would like him to fit in with their own religion or lack thereof.

Furthermore, Jefferson has been used by very different groups to argue for totally different views on freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. In his book *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Charles B. Sanford emphasizes how Jefferson is being used to argue “both sides of the issue” when it comes to the “continuing debate about the place of religion in American society.” Moreover, Sanford points out how “it is always possible in Jefferson's voluminous writings to find statements on various sides of many issues.”³⁶

In conclusion, it could be argued that the Culture Wars are real, at least to the extent that they seriously affect political discourse in present-day America. Furthermore, the Culture Wars contribute in large extent to increasing polarization of American politics and American media. It is in the form of Culture War discourse where Thomas Jefferson, as a national icon widely treasured by many Americans, matter a great deal to both conservatives and liberals. How one interprets Jefferson says a lot about how one interprets the American Creed. The fundamental nature of American ideals is very much connected to Jefferson. Consequently, winning the interpretational battle over what Jefferson actually believed about the role of religion becomes central to the Culture Wars in regard to religion.

Thesis Statement

This thesis will look at how Jefferson, as one of the most revered of the Founding Fathers, is being referred to by both conservatives and liberals to add strength to their arguments in the contemporary Culture War debates about religion in America. Jefferson is undoubtedly an important figure to most Americans, liberal and conservative alike, because he epitomizes the American Creed. The main focus of this thesis will be on how Jefferson is used by both sides of America's Culture Wars in regard to the role of religion in American society. By exploring how Thomas Jefferson is being interpreted by different groups to present diametrically opposed versions of the Founding of the United States of America, this thesis will show how important the American Creed is to almost all Americans, regardless of their religious,

³⁶ Charles B. Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 2.

political, or ideological viewpoints. By comparing and contrasting how liberal organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, fundamentalist atheist organization such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and neo-conservative organizations such as David Barton's WallBuilders, all turn to Thomas Jefferson for inspiration and arguments, it will become clear how Jefferson truly is the hero of conservatives and liberals alike. In addition, this thesis examines the role of religion and the separation of church and state in a more general sense when it comes to the two cases of the War on Christmas and public education. Furthermore, an attempt will be made at examining to what extent the conservative and liberal versions of Jefferson are true, and to what degree it is possible to make use of Jefferson's legacy in a modern discussion of the role of religion in American society.

Chapter Outline

The second chapter of this thesis seeks to explore the complex character that is Thomas Jefferson and what views he held on the role of religion in American society, the separation of church and state, and individual religious freedom. Furthermore, this chapter also investigates what Jefferson's personal religious beliefs were and if these might have had any impact on his views concerning the previously mentioned issues. This chapter also examines how the Enlightenment figure Jefferson was a man who strongly believed in reason, progress, and science, while at the same time had very profound religious beliefs and became a quite accomplished and ground-breaking hobby theologian. There is a fairly broad consensus in academia on most of the issues that the religious right and liberals disagree on when it comes to Thomas Jefferson, and this chapter will make that clear. Finally, the second chapter will give a brief and general overview of the development of religious liberty and the separation of church and state in the United States by looking at landmark Supreme Court decisions and history of changing interpretations and the general direction of American society when it comes to the role of religion in the public sphere.

Chapter three and four both deal with specific and more recent battlegrounds of the Culture Wars, where interpretations of the history of the Founding of America, Thomas Jefferson's views on religious freedom, the separation of church and state, and the role of religion in American society all play an important part. Chapter three brings attention to the example of the War on Christmas as a recent arena where contrasting views on religious freedom and the separation of church and state come into play, whereas the fourth chapter

deals with the role of Jefferson in public education and the fight between conservatives and liberals on the Texas State Board of Education over new textbook standards in social studies.

In the War on Christmas, Jefferson is being called upon by both sides of the conflict, as well as moderates who try to calm things down. Moreover, the chapter dealing with this part of the Culture Wars explores the historical position of Christmas as a holiday in the United States and tells the story of previous wars on Christmas from colonial times onward. The chapter then goes on to discuss the recent War on Christmas launched by Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, which has caused several battles between conservatives and liberals.

Chapter four deals with the role of Jefferson when it comes to public education. Central to the conflict in the Texas textbook war of 2010 is from what perspective American history should be told. Whether or not America was founded as a Christian nation is one of the most hotly debated issues, in which Thomas Jefferson plays an important role. Additionally, chapter four will show how the Texas textbook war is just one of many conflicts that follows a long line of controversies over how American history is taught and what role religion should play in public schools.

Finally, chapter five contains the final discussion and conclusion of the thesis with the aim of better understanding why Thomas Jefferson is so important to all parts of the contemporary political landscape and how Jefferson is used to argue conflicting views about the role of religion in America.

Sources and Methodology

When it comes to primary sources, Jefferson himself wrote an immense amount from which one can delve into his views a wide range of topics. This thesis will rely heavily on Jefferson's own writings when it comes to interpreting his views on religion and what role it should play in American society and government. First, Jefferson's thoughts on religion, reason, and politics in general are analyzed in chapter two to make it clear what plausible interpretations of Jefferson's views can and cannot be made. For instance, claiming that Jefferson was either a traditional, conservative Christian or an atheist are both interpretations that do not seem to fit with Jefferson's own writings. Secondly, an attempt is made at interpreting Jefferson's views on religious liberty, separation of church and state, and the role of religion in the public sphere in regard to both the War on Christmas and the Culture War issue of religion and public schools. Finally, as a conclusion to the thesis, the Jeffersonian legacy of religious liberty, traceable in the primary sources of Jefferson's writings, is debated in light of what this legacy could mean for the United States today and in the future.

Moreover, newspaper reports as well as radio and television broadcasts that deal with the current Culture Wars battlegrounds of the War on Christmas and education all serve as crucial primary sources to presenting those two ideological conflicts in which Jefferson is so essential to both conservatives and liberals. In addition, court cases such as *Lynch v. Donnelly* and *Skoros v. City of New York* are great examples of how the War on Christmas is being played out in the courts. For the chapter on religion and education, the documentary film *The Revisionaries*, as well as minutes from the meetings of the Texas State Board of Education, are primary sources that provide great insight into the process of how the religious right tried to change the way Jefferson was presented in the curriculum.

CHAPTER 2

Sworn Upon the Altar of God

After Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, his relatives found the epitaph that he had written before his death. Along with detailed instructions and a drawing of what his tombstone should look like, Jefferson expressed in his epitaph a clear wish for what should be inscribed on the obelisk of his grave: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia.”³⁷ These were the three achievements that Jefferson himself was most proud of and wished to be remembered for.

Jefferson was perhaps the most important – and surely the most renowned – proponent of the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment in America. Not only did he compose such an important document when it comes to democratic ideals as the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson also wrote a piece of legislation so essential to the preservation of religious freedom as the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. Furthermore, Thomas Jefferson founded a great institution for advanced education. Certainly, these achievements represent many of the central principles of the ideals of the Enlightenment that Jefferson held so dear.

This chapter will first show how Jefferson was both a man of reason and of religion by exploring the views and beliefs that he held. Secondly, this chapter will go on to investigate Jefferson’s stance on the separation of church and state. A better understanding of this matter is essential to the exploration of the way Jefferson is being called upon by conservatives and liberals in present-day Culture War battles. Finally, this chapter gives a brief summary of the developments of religious liberty and the various interpretations of First Amendment issues throughout American history.

Reason and Religious Freedom

In accordance with the spirit of the Enlightenment, Jefferson strongly believed in reason, the laws of nature, and rationality. Thus, his pride of being the founder of the University of Virginia makes perfect sense. Furthermore, individual freedom and protection for individuals

³⁷ “Epitaph” in *Writings: Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters* by Thomas Jefferson (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1984), 706-707.

against a powerful state or church are clearly expressed through his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. It therefore seems clear that Jefferson took great pride in having been involved in making some major Enlightenment ideals part of American society, whereas he did not sing his own praises for perhaps even greater personal achievements such as being president of the United States. This seems to fit well with many of the Founding Fathers' strong emphasis on the importance of virtue for leaders in power. Jefferson was not most proud of having been president or a prestigious public person – he actually preferred living the quiet life of a country gentleman at Monticello – but of what he had managed to achieve for the public good. To Jefferson, religious freedom was perhaps the most important of all civil liberties, and therefore the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom was to him his greatest achievement.

As one the most prominent figures in bringing the ideas of the Enlightenment to America, Jefferson was a man who believed strongly in reason, while at the same time being a man of strong personal religious faith. Jefferson himself held personal religious views that were fairly radical compared to that of the Anglican Church in his home state Virginia, as well as other mainstream churches in America. Writing to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson gave advice on religious matters: "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."³⁸ Jefferson grew up in colonial Virginia, where the Anglican Church was the official religion. Edwin S. Gaustad describes how the colony tried its best to make certain that Anglicanism would be the official religion, dissuading other religions or even driving them out. Additionally, the Anglican Church of colonial Virginia dictated people's religious lives: "Severe legislation passed in Jamestown in 1610 provided that all the people attend morning and evening prayer and that those who 'shall often and willfully absent themselves' from divine services be punished according to the law."³⁹ Such a society – which existed in Virginia up until the American Revolution – did not appeal to Jefferson, who wanted to protect the liberty of every individual to decide for himself what to believe or not to believe. So when the time came to change the colonial laws of Virginia during and after the American Revolution, Jefferson became perhaps the strongest and most important advocate for religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the United States. In his letter to

³⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 902.

³⁹ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996), 2.

Carr, Jefferson went on to say that his nephew “must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, & neither believe nor reject anything because any other persons, or description of persons have rejected or believed it.”⁴⁰

Three giants of the British Enlightenment were among Jefferson’s most treasured influences: Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Locke (1632-1704), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Jefferson once showed some of his paintings to Alexander Hamilton, when Hamilton asked who were pictured in the paintings of Bacon, Locke, and Newton, whereupon Jefferson answered by explaining who they were and stating that they were the “trinity of the three greatest men the world had ever produced.”⁴¹ Francis Bacon was vital to Jefferson because “he was one of the first to champion the modern scientific method of detailed observation of facts and logical thinking instead of the medieval method of theological synthesis.”⁴² Newton was essential because of his groundbreaking work on the laws of physics and the universe. This meant that humans could understand how nature worked and be “forever freed from fear and superstition”, which to Newton proved the “greater glory of God.”⁴³

Locke’s influence is undoubtedly clear in the Declaration of Independence, where the people’s natural rights to liberty and equality are clearly expressed, as well as popular sovereignty; the right of the people to overthrow a government that does not honor these natural rights. In regard to religion, Locke firmly believed in a separation of church and state, as well as religious toleration. Nonetheless, Locke did not want to extend toleration to “Catholics (who supported a foreign prince)” nor to “Jews or Quakers (who did not believe in the Trinity).”⁴⁴ Even though Jefferson adored Locke, he believed that religious toleration should be absolute and unlimited, thus tolerating any religions and any religious or non-religious views. Jefferson’s take on Locke’s toleration was: “Where he stopped short, we may go on.”⁴⁵ It is especially clear in this case how Jefferson not only went further, but built on the European Enlightenment, to produce what became an original American Enlightenment for the newborn republic of the New World.

To Jefferson, allowing any religious views was the key. Government should not interfere in religious matters, neither by propagating nor by prohibiting any religion:

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 903-904.

⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, January 16, 1811, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1236.

⁴² Sanford, 9.

⁴³ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 28.

It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself. Subject opinion to coercion: whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men; men governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face and stature. Introduce the bed of Procrustes then, and as there is danger that the large men may beat the small, make us all of a size, by lopping the former and stretching the latter. Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a Censor morum over each other. Is uniformity attainable? Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth.⁴⁶

For Jefferson, religion was a private matter between him and his God. Jefferson was skeptical of much of organized religion, and refused to follow institutionalized dogmas with blind faith: “He could be quite contentious about traditional, dogmatic, or sectarian religions, and, in the mood of many Enlightenment figures, was critical of ‘priestcraft’ and institutional religion.”⁴⁷ It seems fairly evident that Jefferson’s personal religious beliefs and skepticism towards organized religion resulted in an even stronger passion for establishing the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state in the state of Virginia, as well as the United States as a whole.

Clearly, religious freedom was very close to Jefferson’s heart. It was the issue he worked hardest to resolve throughout his life, it was the issue that his enemies used against him, and it was the issue in which he most heavily immersed himself. To Jefferson, religious freedom and the complete separation of church and state was an issue so fundamentally important to the founding of a democratic republic in the New World, that more practical matters had to be trumped. Charles B. Sanford makes a point out of the fact that Jefferson voluntarily supported his local Anglican church financially and otherwise, but nevertheless worked hard to disestablish the Anglican Church’s strong position and its ties to government in Virginia. Jefferson put his “deep, philosophical conviction” of separation, disestablishment, and religious liberty first. Even though Jefferson in many ways cared a great deal for the Anglican Church, “he loved freedom more.” Therefore he did not – as many of his Anglican friends – believe that progress in public morality could possibly be made through a state-supported, established Anglican Church. In Jefferson’s opinion

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 286.

⁴⁷ Martin E. Marty, preface to *Jefferson and Religion*, by Eugene R. Sheridan (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1998), 7.

“disestablishment would make the church strong and the pastors more zealous.” Even in the unlikely case of the opposite result, Jefferson firmly believed that “disestablishment was still necessary because the danger of religious oppression and tyranny outweighed the danger of religious indifference and public immorality.”⁴⁸

Thus it seems clear that Jefferson believed that Christianity could be an important force in instilling public morality and making the citizenry more virtuous. However, Jefferson was obviously skeptical of the potential tyranny an established church could lead to. In Jefferson’s mind, both government and religion would most likely become corrupted if they were entangled. Therefore, the wish for a clear separation of church and state, in order to protect the government as well as the church, is the legacy that Thomas Jefferson left behind.

The Historical Development of the Separation of Church and State in the United States

After the American Revolutionary War, freedom of religion quickly became an essential component in creating a stable and unified nation. Not only were the Enlightenment ideals of the Founders important in this regard, but also anything else than freedom of religion seemed highly dangerous and practically inconvenient to the stability of the new nation. Simply because there were already many different religious groups of great importance around the country, it would be very hard to establish a State Church that everyone could agree on. Parts of some religious groups such as the Anglicans in the South or the Puritan Congregationalists in New England might want to keep their established government supported churches, but a federal State Church would be very difficult to agree on. In *Church and State in the United States*, Anson Phelps Stokes and Leo Pfeffer assert that even if one leaves out the “influence of the theories of European and American philosophers and various historical factors, the actual, practical necessities of the situation at the end of the eighteenth century in the United States could not be met by a State Church or even by mere toleration on the part of the dominant Protestants on the part of other religious groups.”⁴⁹ Consequently, during the time before the Bill of Rights were adopted and religious freedom and the separation of church and state became federal law, the fact that as diverse religious groups as Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews were already well settled in America – as well as new immigrants coming from Europe from yet many other religious groups – meant that full religious freedom and the separation of church and state on

⁴⁸ Sanford, 32.

⁴⁹ Anson Phelps Stokes and Leo Pfeffer, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 36.

the federal level would be the most pragmatic solution and the most likely solution if everyone were to agree.

Furthermore, the general “idea of progress and the new faith in humanity,” which were obviously essential parts of the Enlightenment movement in America, along with the influence of most of the Founders and quite a few religious leaders, were integral to the creation of the First Amendment and complete religious freedom in the United States.⁵⁰ Henry May calls the American Enlightenment the “Moderate Enlightenment,” which had a “delicate balance between religion and science, reason and passion, aristocracy and democracy, freedom and order.”⁵¹ This echoes Hannah Arendt’s assertion that the American Revolution was successful, and the French Revolution was not, because in America the working class was “poor but not miserable” and therefore “misery and want” did not exist in America like it did in France.⁵² As a consequence, moderation was possible in the American Revolution where immediate radical changes to the societal order already in place were not necessary. Stephen Prothero points out how “religion mattered in the American Revolution too, which proceeded very differently from France’s more secular revolt.”⁵³

When the United States signed a treaty with Ottoman Tripolitania in Tripoli in 1797, known as the Treaty of Tripoli, the federal government of the United States let it be known to the world that the United States of America was a purely secular state that would not enter into disputes or war because of religion:

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext, arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.⁵⁴

The Treaty of Tripoli is a common source for those who want to argue that the United States is a purely secular state, and that there has to be a complete separation of church and state.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 36-39.

⁵¹ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 100.

⁵² Hannah Arendt, “On Revolution,” in *American Social and Political Thought: A Reader* edited by Andreas Hess (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 119.

⁵³ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 58.

⁵⁴ Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke (ed.), *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States. From the 1st session of the 1st to the 3rd session of the 13th congress, inclusive: commencing March 3, 1789, and ending March 3, 1815, Volume II* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1832), 19.

According to Stephen Prothero, “liberal advocates of the separation of church and state repeatedly cite this obscure treaty.”⁵⁵

Conservative Evangelicals such as David Barton, on the other hand, tend to emphasize that the treaty was negotiated to protect American merchant ships in the Mediterranean, and that the American envoys would thus emphasize their country’s secular federal government to distance themselves from the traditional, Old World European powers known to the Islamic world as “Christian nations,” which had waged holy wars with the Muslims for centuries. Furthermore, Barton argues, the fact that the federal government cannot establish a national religion does not mean that America cannot be seen as a Christian nation with a Christian people.⁵⁶ Until the adaption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, the First Amendment only applied to the federal government and not to the various states, which until then could have established state religions. This provision from the Fourteenth Amendment was not even put into practice until 1947, when both the affirming and dissenting Justices of the Supreme Court concluded in *Everson v. Board of Education* that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment must apply to all the states.⁵⁷

When arguing for an interpretation of the First Amendment diametrically opposed to that of liberals, conservatives often refer to other important creedal (of the American Creed, that is) documents, such as the 1892 U.S. Supreme Court opinion that affirms that the United States is a “Christian nation” and that “we are a Christian people, and the morality of the country is deeply engrafted upon Christianity.”⁵⁸ For a long period of time, various practices of government-endorsed promotion of religion in public institutions, particularly public schools, existed. According to lawyer and assistant counsel to the U.S. Congress, Raymond W. Kaselonis, who relies on many of David Barton’s arguments and interpretations, the Articles of Confederation required that any state which wanted to be accepted into the Union had to “teach religion and morality in addition to reading, writing and arithmetic.” To Kaselonis, the fact that many of the Founders who adopted the First Amendment had also been part of adopting the Articles of Confederation seems to be a fact absent from the current “mindset that the First Amendment requires a strict ‘separation of church and State.’ ” In Kaselonis opinion, the U.S. Supreme Court drastically changed the interpretation of the First Amendment to a “separationist jurisprudence” with the decision in the 1962 case *Engel v.*

⁵⁵ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 3.

⁵⁶ David Barton, “Treaty of Tripoli” (January, 2000), <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=125>

⁵⁷ “Freedom of Religion,” *Lincoln.edu*, accessed October 18, 2014.

<http://www.lincoln.edu/criminaljustice/hr/Religion.htm>

⁵⁸ *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457 (1892).

Vitale, where voluntary school prayer was deemed unconstitutional and in conflict with the principles of the First Amendment. In 1963, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, where Pennsylvania's statute "that required ten verses of the Bible to be read at the opening of each school day" was also outlawed, further "opened the door to an influx of 'separationist' jurisprudence." Kaselonis asserts that "modern Supreme Court Establishment Clause jurisprudence" does not allow for "religion, let alone Christianity" to "be introduced into public schools in America," but that this was not the case in earlier times. The Supreme Court, Kaselonis claims, used to play "a vital role in 'preaching' the importance of Christianity in American culture and the need for the American youth to be educated in the tenets of Christianity." The major shift in Establishment jurisprudence came with the Supreme Court's "flawed interpretation of a letter written by Thomas Jefferson" in the *Everson v. Board of Education* case in 1947.⁵⁹

Many other law scholars, however, disagree with Kaselonis and similar conservative Christian interpretations of the Constitution and other founding documents. Mark G. Valencia, law professor at the University of Hawaii, points out that before the "landmark cases" of *Sherbert v. Verner* in 1963 and *Lemon v. Kurtzman* in 1971, "judicial treatment of religious liberty was hardly cohesive." In Valencia's opinion, the Articles of Confederation lacked "many of the powers and liberties that we assume must exist for any democracy (or republic) to survive." These "glaring deficiencies" led to the creation of the Constitution and shortly after the Bill of Rights. James Madison, Valencia asserts, "flatly rejected the contention that governments at any level should be allowed to support any religious sect or abridge religious liberty." Furthermore, Valencia argues that the Supreme Court "relied on Thomas Jefferson's letter to Danbury Baptist Association" in its decisions in *Everson* in 1947, and that prior to this case "law decisions ... were inconsistent and in some instances alarming."⁶⁰

Religious Freedom as a Natural Right

The argument over how to interpret Thomas Jefferson's use of the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" takes us back to 1802. As president at that time, Jefferson answered a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association where he famously

⁵⁹ Raymond W. Kaselonis, Jr., "Everson and 'the Wall of Separation Between Church and State': The Supreme Court's Flawed Interpretation of Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists," in the *Regent University Law Review*, Vol. 17:101 2004-2005, 101-124.

⁶⁰ Mark G. Valencia, "Take Care of Me When I Am Dead: An Examination of American Church-State Development and the Future of American Religious Liberty," in the *SMU Law Review*, Vol. 49 1579, 1995-1996, 1580-1600.

affirmed that there should be “a wall of separation between church and state,” which has later become a central part of the argument for full separation:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate owners of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.⁶¹

Thus, Jefferson is reiterating the powerful assertion from the Declaration of Independence, that all humans have natural rights. According to Charles A. Miller, “equality is the central theme of Jefferson’s view of human nature.”⁶² Merrill Peterson further stresses Jefferson’s belief on the matter of equality as a natural right: “All men possessed an innate moral sense, the faculty of reason and essentially the same biological needs. Hence the doctrine of equality was grounded in the fact of natural history.”⁶³ In regards to religion, Jefferson applied the Enlightenment principles of the natural right of freedom of expression and of tolerance:

Would the world be more beautiful were all our faces alike? Were our tempers, our talents, our tastes, our forms, our wishes, our aversions and pursuits cast exactly in the same mould? If no varieties existed in the animal, vegetable, or mineral creation, but all move strictly uniform, catholic, and orthodox, what a world of physical and moral monotony would it be!⁶⁴

Consequently, it is clearly evident that if one wants law decisions related to religious liberty to be in line with Thomas Jefferson and the views he expressed in the letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, one must argue for a clear separation of church and state which means that the government cannot directly support or promote any religious – or non-religious, for

⁶¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Danbury Baptists,” January 1, 1802, in *Library of Congress*.
<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>

⁶² Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 57.

⁶³ Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 94.

⁶⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 29, 1817, in *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* by Charles A. Miller.

that matter – sect. In addition, James Madison clearly agreed with Jefferson on this issue, through the creation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, if you honestly want important founding documents and the Framers on your side, there simply is no way of avoiding the promotion of full religious liberty and a clear separation of church and state. What is not so clear, however, is where to draw the line for what should be considered an establishment of religion, in other words how directly supportive of a religious or non-religious viewpoint the government must be to violate the First Amendment.

Yet, at the same time, many Americans feel that religion is such an important part of culture that it cannot be forced out of the public sphere. When it comes to politics, many see religion as a powerful force for positive change. This applies not only to religious conservatives, even though they are perhaps what one would associate with such a view in later years. For instance, the civil rights movement of the 1960s was strongly empowered by religion with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the front figure. As the neo-conservative movement started gaining momentum in the 1980s religion was becoming an important factor in American politics to a much greater extent than in the previous decades.

The Protestant minister Richard John Neuhaus published his book, *The Naked Public Square*, in 1984. According to R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister, Neuhaus was a Lutheran about to convert to Catholicism and also a liberal gradually turning into a neo-conservative who argued that “the public life of the nation no longer included a significant or sufficient recognition of a common religious foundation.” Furthermore, Neuhaus saw religion “at the heart of culture” and that “without a shared religious point of reference, no society could debate or resolve conflicts in values.”⁶⁵ To Griffith and McAlister, Neuhaus was first in a line of conservative intellectuals who argued that Christianity is “under siege.” Since the 1980s, the feeling that Christianity is being pushed out of the public sphere has only increased. “Although conservative Christians have been the most vocal about the decrying ‘the war on Christians,’” Griffith and McAlister write,

commentators across the political spectrum have expressed increasingly outspoken concerns about the ‘marginalization’ of faith. From Joseph Lieberman to Barack Obama, from liberal evangelicals to mainstream Muslims, politicians and observers have decried the lack of attention to religion, and lack of respect for religious people, in U.S. politics. Not for the first time in U.S. history, there is a profound sense of crisis about the unsettled relationship between religion and politics in our public life.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister, “Introduction: Is the Public Square Still Naked?,” in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3, Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States (Sep. 2007), 527.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 528.

Since 2001, the White House has been criticized for its Faith-Based and Community Initiative, launched by President George W. Bush as his first Executive Order, just nine days after being sworn into office. The program, which gives public funds to faith-based organizations to perform charitable work, has been continued by President Barack Obama, albeit under a slightly different name; the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. According to an article by Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle in the *DePaul Law Review* in 2006, this program would have been “constitutionally unthinkable thirty years ago.”⁶⁷ The reason why this is problematic constitutionally, is that some of the faith-based groups have been accused of not only providing charity, but using government funds to actively promote religion. Such a development, which in a way has turned back the tide caused by the Supreme Court decisions from the late 1940s to early 1970s, has coincided with the rise of the religious right and the current day Culture Wars.

In conclusion, the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state in the United States have always been – and probably always will be – difficult to balance. If one group of people want to freely exercise their religion or non-religion in the public sphere with the support of the government or in government institutions, there is always the potential problem that doing so might make another group of people feel like a system of religious or non-religious beliefs is being forced upon them with the government’s support. That is why both the religious right and secular liberals feel that their viewpoints are under siege in the public realm.

Jefferson’s Religious Beliefs

Various theories on Jefferson’s religious views exist among scholars today. In his preface to Eugene R. Sheridan’s *Jefferson and Religion*, Martin E. Marty claims that Jefferson can be viewed as a theologian “interpreting the life of a people in the light of a transcendent reference.”⁶⁸ Moreover, according to Marty, “much of Jefferson’s interest in religion was of a generic, broadly philosophical sort. He could be described as a Deist, which is to say he believed in natural law, in natural reason, in a God accessible without the medium of an inspired scripture.”⁶⁹ Some scholars would agree with such a description of Jefferson’s religious beliefs, while others would claim that Jefferson was a Unitarian.

⁶⁷ Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle, “The Faith-Based Initiative and the Constitution,” in the *DePaul Law Review*, Vol. 55:1, 2005-2006, 4.

⁶⁸ Marty, 7.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Thomas Jefferson was a member of the Anglican Church his whole life. However, he certainly held independent, personal religious beliefs of his own that did not conform to the Church's dogmas. This is evident in the fact that Jefferson could not accept the honor of being a Godfather, because he could not sincerely declare that he professed to all the articles of faith of the Anglican Church.⁷⁰ For one, Jefferson did not believe in the trinity, which he regarded to be "incomprehensible."⁷¹ However, he remained an Anglican and baptized his own children.⁷² Later in his life, Jefferson edited his own version of the Bible, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, where he cut out anything supernatural, like the virgin birth or any other miracles. To Jefferson, the start of the Bible begins with the down to earth story of how "Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem, Where Jesus is Born."⁷³ When describing his edition of the Bible, Jefferson wrote to Charles Thomson:

I, too, have made a wee-little book from the same materials, which I call the Philosophy of Jesus; it is a paradigm of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject. A more beautiful or precious model of ethics I have never seen; it is a document in proof that *I* am a *real Christian*, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call *me* infidel and *themselves* Christians and preachers of the Gospels, while they draw their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said nor saw. They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the greater reformer of the vicious ethics and deism of the Jews, were he to return on earth, would not recognize one feature.⁷⁴

In this letter some of the main religious beliefs of Jefferson can be seen. First and foremost, it is the morals of Jesus that Jefferson believes in. To Jefferson, the apostle Paul was a "Platonist" who had misinterpreted and ruined the original message of Jesus. Furthermore, the dogmas of the various Christian churches throughout history had done much of the same.

Stephen J. Vicchio refutes the claims that Jefferson was a Deist or a Unitarian, but points out that he certainly shared many of the beliefs held by both these groups. Overall, it would be wise to conclude that Jefferson was a very independent thinker that cannot easily be put into any organized system of religious beliefs. As Vicchio writes, "Jefferson considered

⁷⁰ Gaustad, 7-8.

⁷¹ Sanford, 61.

⁷² Gaustad.

⁷³ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 13.

⁷⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1372-1373.

himself a Christian, in so far as he was a follower of the moral teachings of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁵ Even though there are subtle differences in the interpretations of what Jefferson’s religious beliefs were, it would be fair to say that there is a fairly broad scholarly consensus that Jefferson was not what most Americans today would recognize as a traditional mainstream Christian, but that at the same time he was definitely a Christian. If one follows Jefferson’s own reasoning, though, whether or not he was a Christian or what type of Christian are questions that in a way are no one else’s business but Jefferson’s own and it should not really matter when we evaluate his impact as a civic leader. It thus seems unmistakably evident that Jefferson truly was a proponent of a secular state that would stay out of the individual’s personal beliefs and not interfere in matters of religion.

Civil Religion

According to Charles Sanford, Jefferson emphasized “works over faith” and thus “stressed a tension that has always been characteristic of American religion and theology.” This means that “moral acts are more important than religious mysticism.” Jefferson applied the “ethical teachings of Jesus to America’s social problems,” which has resulted in a tradition of both religious and political reform in America. Furthermore, Sanford calls attention to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s assertion that these movements’ “goals, emphases, and point of view are essentially Jeffersonian.”⁷⁶

Sanford and Schlesinger’s views on the Jeffersonian tradition of putting Christian ethics into political practice as a typically American phenomenon resonates with Robert N. Bellah’s concept of civil religion in America. Bellah asserts that the “religious dimension of political life” (...) not only provides a grounding that makes any form of political absolutism illegitimate, it also provides a transcendent goal for the political process.” Furthermore, Bellah points out how this tradition is so intertwined into the general American culture, that the first Catholic president of the United States would completely adhere to its principles:

Just below the surface throughout Kennedy’s inaugural address, it becomes explicit in the closing statement that God’s work must be our own. This very activist and noncontemplative conception of the fundamental religious obligation, which has been historically associated with the Protestant position should be enunciated so clearly in the first major statement of the first Catholic president seems to underline how deeply established it is in the American outlook.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Stephen J. Vicchio, *Jefferson’s Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 142.

⁷⁶ Sanford, 138-139.

⁷⁷ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm

Consequently, it is evident how Jefferson's Enlightenment weighting of the morals of Jesus over religious mystery has made its mark on American civil religion. Stephen Prothero puts it this way:

Thomas Jefferson would have been forced to reject Jesus if he had seen him as a take-it-or-leave-it-proposition. But Jefferson, as bold in religion as in politics, refused to grant Christians the right to serve as exclusive interpreters. Christ he could not accept, but he was determined to revere Jesus. As Jefferson sat down in the White House, razor in hand, and began to cut and paste his own Bible, the American Jesus was born.⁷⁸

According to Gaustad, Jefferson strongly believed that "the teachings of Jesus had relevance well beyond the confines of Christianity, just because moral duties and moral instincts had relevance that transcended any sectarian or even political structure."⁷⁹ As a result, there is definitely an excellent argument to be made that Jefferson viewed Christianity as important to American society, especially because of the morals of the religion. Nonetheless, it is certain that Jefferson would not accept any infringement upon religious liberties or the separation of church and state.

Religious Freedom and the Separation of Church and State

Jefferson's view on the freedom of speech and thought, and thus also religious liberty, is elegantly and poetically phrased in one of his letters to Benjamin Rush, and the quotation also appears as an inscription under the dome of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.: "For I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."⁸⁰ The interesting duality in this quotation is that Jefferson not only expresses his view of full freedom of conscience, without restraint, but also claims that this is a God-given, natural right, just as he does in the Declaration of Independence. It is Jefferson's emphasis on God-given rights that has given neo-conservatives something to latch onto when they want to argue that the United States is an inherently Christian nation, founded on Biblical principles.

According to Jefferson, God wants man to be free. Religious belief is a matter between each individual and God, where no other humans have the right to interfere. This view is expressed even more clearly in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom:

⁷⁸ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 12-13.

⁷⁹ Gaustad, 210-211.

⁸⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1082.

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion.⁸¹

What is clear in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Jefferson and passed with the help of fellow Virginian Founding Father James Madison to make Virginia the first U.S. state to disestablish its official religion in 1786, is that the natural rights of humans are incompatible with government-supported religion. Furthermore, the law states that “no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever” and that “all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion.”⁸² These two principles are the foundation upon which the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause were based: The government cannot favor or endorse one particular religion, but at the same time it cannot restrain the citizens’ liberty to freely exercise any religious or non-religious beliefs. There is an overlapping tension between these two principles from which conflicts and disagreements can arise.

Robert M. O’Neil emphasizes that Jefferson was one of only two presidents that “ever refused to issue a thanksgiving proclamation because he such a decree would cross the line between church and state” and that “the Jeffersonian commitment to separation is remarkably clear and consistent.” At the same time, even though Jefferson was strongly opposed to direct government funding of religious activities he was not, however, so concerned with the use of government property for religion and “condoned the use of the Albermarle County Courthouse for services of worship and actually attended religious services in the national Capitol.” O’Neil additionally stresses that “scholars have recognized a paradox between Jefferson’s (and Madison’s) uncompromising views on financial or monetary support of religious bodies, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, access to public sites for religious activities.”⁸³ Consequently, it is evident that Jefferson’s views on separation are not as straightforward and clear-cut as some secular liberals would argue, and even though Jefferson was not the Founding Father of an inherently Christian nation like

⁸¹ The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 346.

⁸² *Ibid*, 347.

⁸³ Robert M. O’Neil, “Jefferson’s Views on Religious Liberty,” in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 56, No. 4 (October 1999) 793.

some from the religious right would claim, there are certain aspects of Jefferson's understanding of separation of church and state and religious freedom that are up for debate and interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be fair to assert that Thomas Jefferson is a complex, nuanced, and somewhat paradoxical character. His denouncement of slavery while at the same time keeping his slaves remains one of the great paradoxes between his ideals and his actions, even though he did offer reasons and arguments for why he could not get rid of slavery as an institution and chose to continue owning slaves. When it comes to religion, Jefferson's personal views are also somewhat paradoxical. From the vast scholarly works available on Jefferson and religion, however, it is clear that Jefferson – despite many claims from various people – was neither an atheist nor what one would associate with a conservative Christian today.

Along the same lines, Jefferson's views on the separation of church and state are not as clear-cut as some would claim. On this issue there is room for interpretation, but nevertheless it appears that Jefferson was a staunch defender of separation. He was wary of the power of the clergy, or what he called priestcraft, as well as the mingling of government and religion to control the minds of individuals. However, Jefferson did place great value in the civic virtue that could be gained from a Christian citizenry. Even though he did not want to issue proclamations of thanksgiving or encourage citizens to pray, he did not oppose the use of public, government buildings for religious activities.

Thus it is clear that the Jeffersonian legacy when it comes to religious liberty could be interpreted in different ways to support slightly different approaches to what role religion should play in public life and whether or not the public sphere should be more or less open to religious expressions. It is this tension that has led to different decisions in various landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases throughout American history. Despite Jefferson's impact, there seems to be a general shift from a clear secular federal government in the early republic to an approach to more entanglement with religion further into the nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century. From the 1940s to the 1970s, however, the secularization of American society and politics is clear. With the landmark Supreme Court decisions in *Engel v. Vitale* and *Abington School District v. Schempp* in the 1962 and 1963, declaring teacher-led school prayer and Bible reading in public schools unconstitutional, conservatives were outraged. This led to the gradual growth of the religious right, which

became a major political force for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. After this, the religious right has only grown more and the polarization of American politics has gotten worse and worse with every political election cycle.

This development of church and state controversies in the United States is where Thomas Jefferson comes in as a central figure for both conservatives and liberals in the Culture Wars. The two following chapters show how the polarization of American politics and the figure of Jefferson have an effect on two distinct conflicts in the Culture Wars; the War on Christmas and the controversies surrounding religion and public education. In both of these conflicts, conservatives and liberals have clearly opposing visions for the role of religion in America. Nevertheless, both sides call upon Thomas Jefferson to supply themselves with arguments.

CHAPTER 3

The War on Christmas

While promoting her new book *Good Tidings and Great Joy: Protecting the Heart of Christmas* during an appearance at Liberty University in December 2013, former Alaska governor and the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin claimed that “if Thomas Jefferson were alive today, he would probably go on Fox News to complain about the war on Christmas.”⁸⁴ In another appearance promoting the same book, Palin told the NBC’s *Today Show*: “What I’m saying is, we need to protect the heart of Christmas and not let an angry atheist armed with an attorney, a Scrooge, tell us that we can’t celebrate traditional faith in America. We have a constitutionally-protected right to celebrate faith, and Christmas is a part of that.”⁸⁵ Responding to Palin’s new book and her appearance on the *Today Show*, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the Reverend Barry Lynn, wrote on the organization’s blog, *Wall of Separation*:

I’m a Christian minister, but because I don’t support the right of government to make theological decisions for all of us by erecting crèches at courthouses, I guess in Palin’s mind that makes me a scrooge. I’m not telling anyone they can’t celebrate “traditional faith” in this country. I’m saying that it’s not all right to force your faith on other people. If that’s wrong, then I guess our Founding Fathers were wrong, too.⁸⁶

Palin and Lynn have diametrically conflicting opinions about the separation of church and state and what role religion should play in the United States. Juxtaposing these two views, it becomes clear that there are two very polarized understandings of what the Founding Fathers actually meant and what the function of religion should be in government and the public sphere.

Around the same time as Palin and Lynn had their exchange of opinions, political satirist and host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, criticized the religious

⁸⁴ Travis Gettys, “Sarah Palin: ‘Angry atheists are trying to abort Christ from Christmas,’ ” *The Raw Story*, December 6, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/12/06/sarah-palin-angry-atheists-are-trying-to-abort-christ-from-christmas/>

⁸⁵ Scott Stump, “Sarah Palin on Christie, GOP: No Ronald Reagan on the scene today,” *Today*, November 11, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.today.com/news/sarah-palin-christie-gop-no-ronald-reagan-scene-today-2D11577346>

⁸⁶ Barry Lynn, “Imaginary Enemies: Sarah Palin’s Phony Fight Against The ‘War On Christmas,’ ” *Wall of Separation*, November 12, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <https://au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/imaginary-enemies-sarah-palin-s-phony->

right and Fox News's coverage of the so-called "War on Christmas" by saying: "How can I enjoy my Christmas when I know that somewhere a little Jewish boy isn't being forced to sing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem?' Where's the joy there?"⁸⁷ Stewart's remarks show that to many who are not part of the religious right, religious neutrality in public schools is more about protecting the rights of individuals to not feel pressured to be part of a religious tradition that is not theirs. On the other hand, to many conservative Americans, celebrating Christmas as a Christian holiday in public schools is part of American traditions that cannot be done away with. Furthermore, the religious right sees the individual right to freely exercise religion as being infringed upon if Christmas is not being honored well enough as an inherently American holiday in public. This recent debate about the War on Christmas is fascinating because very different views – from neo-conservatives to moderates to liberals of American politics – all claim to have the Founders and the Constitution on their side and constantly keep referring to them in their arguments.

This chapter analyzes how all involved parties in the War on Christmas use Jefferson when arguing for completely different understandings of religious freedom. First, the chapter shows how Christmas has been a controversial holiday in American history since colonial times. Secondly, this chapter presents the landmark case of *Lynch v. Donnelly* as a turning point in recent church-state issues connected to Christmas. Furthermore, this chapter examines Bill O'Reilly as a major player in the Culture Wars, and how his War on Christmas has served as a catalyst for making Christmas such a fiercely debated Culture War issue in American politics and media. Moreover, this chapter goes on to present and analyze how very different groups and individuals – the religious right, fundamentalist atheists, liberals, and more moderate voices – all call upon Thomas Jefferson as their hero of religious liberty. Before concluding, the chapter briefly analyzes Jefferson's views on Christmas as a holiday.

Wars on Christmas in American History

Controversy surrounding the celebration of Christmas is not a new phenomenon. In the English-speaking world there have been several "wars" on Christmas, but up until recently these were not similar to the contemporary War on Christmas that Fox News and right wing conservatives claim that liberals are waging. During the reign of Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans in England in the 1640s, Christmas celebrations were seen as a papal and unnecessary distraction from regular piety. Only regular church services on Sundays were to

⁸⁷ Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*, December 3, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-december-3-2013/world-war-c---happy-holidays>

be held, and both secular and religious celebrations of Christmas were banned: “The Directory made clear that Sundays were to be strictly observed as holy days, for the worship of God, but that there were to be no other holy days – ‘festival days, vulgarly called Holy Days, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued’.”⁸⁸

Subsequently, when English Puritans came to America, they continued to curb the celebration of Christmas. Rachel Schnepfer makes a point of this while discussing today’s modern War on Christmas in *The New York Times*: “On their first Christmas in the New World, the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony celebrated the holiday not at all. Instead they worked in the fields.”⁸⁹ In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans “went one step further and actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas. From 1659 to 1681, anyone caught celebrating Christmas in the colony would be fined five shillings.”⁹⁰

Schnepfer’s account falls in line with Stephen Prothero’s assertion that in pre-revolutionary America, “those colonists who were church members did not have any notable reverence for Jesus.” The Puritans were very pious, the “angry Father” was the idea of God that they centered on, and the Old Testament “trumped the new.” Furthermore, Prothero claims that for American Puritans in colonial times, “Christ had a limited role to play; Jesus almost none.”⁹¹ Therefore, in the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, the Puritan ideals from colonial times still stood strong, and many Christians in America did not see Jesus the way most would today. Thus celebrating Christmas was not necessarily essential to being a Christian. As late as 1855, New York newspapers were filled with stories about how Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches would be closed for Christmas Day, because they did not consider the day “a holy one.” In the 1860s, no more than 18 states “officially recognized the holiday.”⁹²

However, the importance of Christmas was changing in the nineteenth century. According to Professor Les Standiford, the author of the book *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits*, “Dickens is responsible for Christmas as we know it. He obviously didn’t invent it as an idea, but what he did with *A Christmas Carol* began the process that led to

⁸⁸ “Christmas abolished! Why did Cromwell abolish Christmas?” *The Oliver Cromwell Website*. Accessed July 13, 2014. <http://www.olivercromwell.org/faqs4.htm>

⁸⁹ Rachel N. Schnepfer, “Yuletide’s Outlaws” in *The New York Times*, December 14, 2012. Accessed July 14, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/opinion/the-puritan-war-on-christmas.html?hp&_r=1&

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Prothero, 10-11.

⁹² Skye Jethani, “‘War on Christmas’? Christians Are Fighting the Wrong One,” in *The Huffington Post*, December 20, 2011, accessed July 24, 2014.

what we have today.”⁹³ Claire Tomalin, a well-regarded Dickens biographer, agrees with Standiford and claims that, “*A Christmas Carol* played a huge part in creating this modern idea of Christmas.”⁹⁴

In the early twentieth century, Christmas started becoming the holiday we know today, with consumers going on their biggest spending-spree of the year. Coca-Cola popularized the image of Santa Claus at this time, and Christmas as the modern, secular festivity we know today started taking shape. With all these changes to Christmas since the American Revolution, it would be difficult to assess what the Founding Fathers would think of the modern version of the holiday and how Americans celebrate it today.

Lynch v. Donnelly

There have been many court cases regarding public and government-funded Christmas celebrations in modern times. Edwin S. Gaustad asserts that “in America, religion has literally been on trial since the 1940s – before the courts, notably before the Supreme Court with ever-increasing frequency and ever-increasing passion.” Furthermore, the concept of American Creed seems to fit in perfectly in this regard: “Since the Constitution is the only text universally considered sacred by Americans, the justices have served as our high priests and moral arbiters in a way hardly envisioned in 1787.”⁹⁵ Hence, Lepore’s concept of deploying the Founding Fathers seems to apply to a certain extent to the courts as well. Whether the courts are interpreting the Constitution based on either original intent or judicial activism, they are still part of the typically American way of referring to the Founders as almost divine authorities when deciding what is right and wrong.

The case that has made the biggest impact on separation between church and state in relationship to Christmas celebrations is the *Lynch v. Donnelly* case of 1984, where the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the town of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, had not violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment when it included a “creche or nativity scene in its annual Christmas display.”⁹⁶ Moreover, the Supreme Court referred to Thomas Jefferson in its decision:

The concept of a “wall” of separation is a useful figure of speech probably deriving

⁹³ Melissa Thompson, “Charles Dickens is the REAL Father of Christmas: How the author defined our festive spirit,” in *The Mirror*, December 27, 2012, accessed July 25, 2014. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/how-charles-dickens-shaped-christmas-1506955>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Gaustad, 222.

⁹⁶ *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984).

from views of Thomas Jefferson. The metaphor has served as a reminder that the Establishment Clause forbids an established church or anything approaching it. But the metaphor itself is not a wholly accurate description of the practical aspects of the relationship that in fact exists between church and state.⁹⁷

The U.S. District Court for Rhode Island, on the other hand, had argued in the first court case from 1982 that the city of Pawtucket had “tried to endorse and promulgate religious beliefs” and that “erection of the creche has the real and substantial effect of affiliating the City with the Christian beliefs that the creche represents.”⁹⁸ Consequently it is plain to see that drawing the line between religion and politics is difficult.

In 1984, the Perkins Professor of Law at Duke University, William Van Alstyne (now a law professor at Thomas Jefferson’s alma mater, the College of William and Mary), argued that *Lynch v. Donnelly* marked a clear shift in Supreme Court decisions on issues of religious freedom and church-state dilemmas. This shift, writes Van Alstyne, is a “movement from one national epigram to another; from ‘E Pluribus Unum’ to ‘In God We Trust,’ from the ideal expressed by our original Latin motto – one nation out of highly diverse but equally welcome states and people – to an increasingly pressing enthusiasm in which government re-establishes itself under distinctly religious auspices.” In the case of *Lynch v. Donnelly*, Van Alstyne asserts that the city of Pawtucket had acted in a way that was in clear violation of the First Amendment and of what Thomas Jefferson would have wanted:

The state had not merely aided ‘all’ religions but rather had promoted emphatically and exclusively *one* religion. It had not only broken with a general neutrality regarding purely religious doctrine, it had also preferred one religion over all others. It had used tax money in support of a religious activity and encouraged belief in, and endorsed, the particularly holy day – Christ’s Mass – of one sect. It openly participated in the affairs of one church by duplicating in wood and plastic the imagery of a sacred event in order to encourage a general secular, commercial enthusiasm to intensify its holy day. The wall of separation between church and state had clearly been breached by a clear governmental, politicized, symbiotic embrace of one faith’s preferred holy day ... Both the case and the tendency it represents are disappointing reminders that religious ethnocentrism, as well as religious insensitivity, are still with us. I do not know whether Mr. Jefferson would have been

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ *Donnelly v. Lynch*, 691 F.2d 1029 (Rhode Island, 1982).

surprised, but I believed he would have been disappointed.⁹⁹

The decision made by the Supreme Court in *Lynch v. Donnelly* therefore appears to be in stark contrast to previous Supreme Court rulings such as the landmark cases of *Everson v. the Board of Education* from 1947, *Engel v. Vitale* from 1962, and *Abington School District v. Schempp* from 1963.

What the debate over *Lynch v. Donnelly* shows is that there is disagreement over what Thomas Jefferson's positions actually were on separation of church and state issues, not just among regular citizens or political demagogues, but among highly educated and esteemed Supreme Court Justices and professors of law. Therefore it is evident that Jefferson's position as a national icon pervades all of American society in so many ways and at so many levels. No matter what one believes about what role religion should play in American society, Thomas Jefferson seems to be the hero to whom one would look for inspiration and arguments.

Bill O'Reilly's War on Christmas

The War on Christmas that has received significant media coverage in America over the last decade is most often associated with a campaign launched by Bill O'Reilly through his TV show *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News. One of O'Reilly's main arguments is that secular liberals are trying to force Christianity out of the public sphere.

On November 30, 2005, O'Reilly appeared on Fox News's *Your World with Neil Cavuto* arguing that retail stores that are greeting customers with the phrase "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" are attacking the federal holiday of Christmas, the large majority of Americans, as well as "insulting" Christians:

The business community says we don't want to offend anybody, so we're not going to say "Merry Christmas." We're going to say "Happy Holidays," all right? That offends millions of Christians, see? Eighty-five percent of the country calls itself Christian. Fifteen percent of the country – you figure these people could do the math if they're CEOs. Eighty-five percent Christian; they are into Christmas, OK? That's their big day. Fifteen percent aren't. Now of those 15 percent, maybe 1 percent are totally insane. They're nuts. They're the ones who are offended. So what it comes down to is that these CEOs and big companies– big companies, like Wal-Mart, Sears, KMart –

⁹⁹ William Van Alstyne, "Trends in the Supreme Court: Mr. Jefferson's Crumbling Wall – A Comment on *Lynch v. Donnelly*," in *Duke Law Journal*, Vol. 1984: 770, 771-787.

will not say “Merry Christmas” in their stores or advertising to cater to 1 percent of Americans who are insane.¹⁰⁰

Consequently, O’Reilly paints a picture where the large majority of Americans find it offensive to be greeted with “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” Furthermore, O’Reilly asserts that people who feel that “Merry Christmas” is a greeting that excludes other religious and secular celebrations that occur between November and January, such as Thanksgiving, New Year’s, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa – must be insane.

As Schnepfer points out, American Christmas traditions have changed fairly dramatically in the country’s relatively short history:

Well into the 18th century, those who attempted to keep the tradition of wassailing alive in New England often found themselves arrested and fined. Indeed, the Puritan War on Christmas lasted up to 1870, when Christmas became a legally recognized federal holiday. Until then, men and women were expected to go to work, stores were expected to remain open, and many churches did not even hold religious services. So the next time someone maintains that they are defending traditional American values by denouncing the War on Christmas, remind them of our 17th-century Puritan forefathers who refused to condone any celebration or even observance of the holiday. In America, our oldest Christmas tradition is, in fact, the War on Christmas.¹⁰¹

Thus it would be hard to claim, as Bill O’Reilly appears to be doing, that contemporary mainstream American Christianity and Christmas traditions are in line with the country’s history. Even more interestingly, O’Reilly insists that America was founded on the principles of Jesus and Christianity:

Here you have a national public holiday signed into law by Ulysses S. Grant in 1870. Christmas, all right? Federal holiday, everybody gets off, no mail delivered, everybody shuts down. Federal holiday. Why is it there? To honor a philosopher, Jesus. Whose philosophy was part of the foundation of our country. All of this is indisputable. Can’t dispute it. OK? A man was born, his name is Jesus, he had a philosophy, the philosophy was incorporated by the Founding Fathers to make up the United States of America, U.S. Grant signs into law the holiday, Christmas.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ O’Reilly, *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, November 30, 2005.

¹⁰¹ Schnepfer.

¹⁰² O’Reilly, *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, November 30, 2005.

As Christmas was approaching in 2006, one year after he had initially launched the idea of a War on Christmas, O'Reilly stated on his radio show, *The Radio Factor with Bill O'Reilly*, that the companies Crate & Barrel and Best Buy were "ordering" their employees "not to say 'Merry Christmas,' which is the worst fascism you could possibly have." Furthermore, O'Reilly alleged that the companies would fire any employees who said "Merry Christmas."¹⁰³

However, O'Reilly's claims turned out to be false, as neither Crate & Barrel nor Best Buy had any such policies. According to an article in the *Augusta Chronicle* on November 22, "Best Buy spokeswoman Dawn Bryant said Best Buy workers are allowed to greet customers any way they choose, including "Merry Christmas," but the company's promotional efforts are limited." Bryant said that the phrase "Happy Holidays" was used in a commercial, because "the idea is that we're celebrating the entire holiday season, just not pulling out any one specific holiday."¹⁰⁴

The main story in that article in the *Augusta Chronicle* was that Wal-Mart, one of the companies O'Reilly had singled out as he launched his campaign against the War on Christmas, had now reverted their policies after having received much criticism the year before: " 'In all candor, we learned a lesson last year by downplaying the word Christmas,' said Dan Fogleman, a Wal-Mart spokesman, referring to the store's Home for the Holidays campaign last year, which this year will be replaced with more references to Christmas."¹⁰⁵

On November 28, 2011, Bill O'Reilly, debated the War on Christmas with David Silverman, president of American Atheists Inc. on his TV show *The O'Reilly Factor*. Silverman argued that the government should treat all citizens equally and not promote any specific religious or non-religious beliefs. O'Reilly then responded by saying that Silverman was "so unreasonable it is frightening." Moreover, O'Reilly asserted that Silverman's view was "insane" and that he was part of a "merry band of fascists."¹⁰⁶ This highly polarized and heated debate between O'Reilly and Silverman illustrates how the Culture Wars in America are given extra fuel by sensationalistic and biased media outlets.

Bill O'Reilly in fact sees himself as very much part of the Culture Wars. In 2006 his book *Culture Warrior* was published, where O'Reilly describes how he sees himself as a

¹⁰³ O'Reilly, *The Radio Factor with Bill O'Reilly*, November 29, 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Preston Sparks, "Wal-Mart shifts back to traditional greeting," in *The Augusta Chronicle*, November 22, 2006, accessed July 18, 2014. http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/11/22/bus_105422.shtml

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bill O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, November 28, 2011.

warrior fighting the liberal elites whose “secular-progressive agenda” has a completely different vision for America than that of the Founding Fathers. In O’Reilly’s opinion, the secular-progressives want to destroy everything that is good about American society and democracy, by replacing capitalism with “sharing the wealth by targeting the affluent for most of the government’s revenue,” getting rid of school discipline, promoting a “naked hostility to religious values and their expression in public,” replacing American power with a “one-world policy,” and finally introducing a “touchy-feely vision of our society that places individual self-expression and rights over self-sacrifice and adult responsibility.” As part of the secular-progressive alliance attempting to make all these changes, O’Reilly names organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), left-wing billionaires who finance everything, “the *New York Times* and other committed left-wing papers,” and the Hollywood elite. O’Reilly calls the ACLU a “fascist organization, because they seek to *impose* their worldview on America” not by democratic means, but by “gaming the legal system.” O’Reilly describes himself as a traditionalist, but nonetheless he affirms that he respects the rights of minorities such as homosexuals and that “we must strive to improve America.” However, O’Reilly emphasizes that “we must also keep faith with the basic tenets of Judeo-Christian philosophy and competitive capitalism that the country was founded on.”¹⁰⁷

Hence it is evident that O’Reilly is a major player in the Culture Wars of America today. Having reached a prominent role at Fox News and thus being able to influence millions of Americans through one of the nation’s major networks, O’Reilly has the power to set the agenda of political debate. This applies specifically to recent debates over the War on Christmas.

On December 17, 2013, O’Reilly declared that the War on Christmas had been won:

Nine years ago when we started this reportage on Christmas, there were orders given by some major corporations in America to their employees, forbidding them – forbidding them – from saying “Merry Christmas.” We outed those companies, they reversed the policy, so today, everybody as far as we know ... can say “Merry Christmas” to anyone they want (...) It isn't a mythical war on Christmas. It's real, and we just won.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 14-19.

¹⁰⁸ O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor*, December 17, 2013.

To a certain extent, O'Reilly is right about having won his fight against the War on Christmas. As a result of O'Reilly's frequent attacks on the War on Christmas every holiday season, the issue has been at the forefront of many American media stories. There are several examples of how this has ended in concrete, practical consequences and how many people feel that there is a War on Christmas that must be stopped.

Angela Skoros, a Roman Catholic and mother of two children in New York City's public school system, started proceedings against the city, because she felt that school policy was favoring Islam and Judaism over Christianity since the Jewish menorah and the Muslim star and crescent are permitted in holiday displays, but not a Christian nativity scene. In her lawsuit, Skoros claimed that the public school system's policy "impermissibly promoted and endorsed the religions of Judaism and Islam, conveyed the impermissible message of disapproval of Christianity, and coerced students to accept the Jewish and Islamic religions."¹⁰⁹

The city of New York, however, defended its policy and claimed that it does not differentiate between religions since it excludes "depictions of deities, religious texts, or scenes of worship such as a Christian nativity scene," and this applies to all religions.¹¹⁰ In the court case of *Skoros v. City of New York*, the court agreed that the city's policy was not in violation of the First Amendment. Skoros appealed, but in 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court decided to not take the case. Brian Rooney of the Thomas More Law Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was "obviously disappointed," and went on to say that "the war on Christmas is ongoing. It is going to continue festering state by state, county by county, and city by city."¹¹¹

As Republican politicians were getting ready for the primaries of the 2008 Presidential Election, Mike Huckabee campaigned in Iowa and one of his main messages in Marshalltown on December 20, 2007 was that the presidential campaign was not the most important thing going on at that "time of year," but the "celebration of the birth of Christ." Moreover, Huckabee also stated that wishing the crowd "Merry Christmas" was probably a "very controversial thing to do." The candidate went on to declare that "what's wrong with our country, what is wrong with our culture, is that you can't say the name Jesus Christ without people going completely berserk."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Warren Richey, "Nativity scene is too religious for New York City schools," in *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 22, 2007, accessed July 21, 2014.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Paul Vitello, "Huckabee, Back in Iowa, Brings Christmas Message," in *The New York Times*, December 21, 2007, accessed July 24, 2014.

Another Republican presidential candidate, Rick Perry, launched a TV commercial during the primaries of the 2012 Presidential Election, where he argued that “there’s something wrong in this country when gays can serve openly in the military but our kids can’t openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school.” Furthermore, Perry promised that, if elected president, he would “end Obama’s war on religion” as well as fighting “against liberal attacks on our religious heritage.”¹¹³

Rick Perry did not get elected president of the United States, but stayed on as governor of Texas. In May of 2013, the state of Texas passed a so-called “Merry Christmas Bill,” a law which guarantees the rights of public school teachers to say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Hanukkah” and “display Christmas trees, nativity scenes or menorahs.” Texas State Representative, Dwayne Bohac, told the *Huffington Post* that he “was a little bit flabbergasted and a little bit upset that we’ve become so politically correct that we can’t call a federal holiday by its name.”¹¹⁴

During the last decade Bill O’Reilly and Fox News have been fighting against the War on Christmas. However, they are not punching in thin air. Fox News’ counterpart, the liberal news network MSNBC like to rile against conservatives and what they see as the stupidity of people like O’Reilly and Palin. These two cable news networks represent a development of media polarization in America where information is mixed with entertainment. Convinced conservatives will watch Fox News and convinced liberals will watch MSNBC to have their opinions and prejudices confirmed by news outlets that are clearly biased. In 2008, *The Washington Post* pointed out that MSNBC’s “evening guest lineup adds to its left-leaning image.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, liberal political satirists and comedians such as Jon Stewart, keep fighting back. Consequently, the War on Christmas is kept very much alive by both sides.

What Bill O’Reilly, the self-proclaimed culture warrior, has set in motion with the War on Christmas is a continuous discussion in American media that is right at the heart of the Culture Wars. Therefore, it does not really matter whether or not the majority of Americans do not hold strong views on how Christmas should be celebrated in the public

¹¹³ Alexandra Petri, “Rick Perry’s ‘Strong’ ad – Obama hates Christmas,” in *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2011, accessed July 24, 2014.

¹¹⁴ Angela Terkel, “Texas Passes ‘Merry Christmas Bill’ To Fight War On Christmas,” in *The Huffington Post*, May 21, 2013, accessed July 18, 2014.

¹¹⁵ Howard Kurtz, “MSNBC, Leaning Left And Getting Flak From Both Sides,” in *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2008, accessed November 2, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/27/AR2008052703047_pf.html

sphere. The polarized camps of American politics and American media make sure that controversy surrounding Christmas erupts every holiday season.

The War on Christmas and Jefferson's Universal Appeal

Bill O'Reilly's claims that the Founding Fathers based the founding of the United States of America on Christianity and that Christmas as a Christian holiday therefore obviously must be essential to what it means to be an American are very interesting. These claims illustrate how O'Reilly is trying to add significance to his arguments by – as Jill Lepore puts it – deploying the Founding Fathers.¹¹⁶ Sarah Palin does just the same thing when she argues that Thomas Jefferson would disapprove of today's War on Christmas led by secular liberals.¹¹⁷

At her appearance at Liberty University, which is a conservative, evangelical college founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell in 1971, Palin claimed that the college was founded on Jeffersonian principles: "Thomas Jefferson and his thinking, I believe that much of it fundamentally came from this area, having spent his summers here, having spent influential years here, two miles away from Liberty University."¹¹⁸ Such a claim makes very little sense, knowing that Jefferson was very adamant that the University of Virginia should have no religious affiliation, nor a chair in the academic study of theology, and did not want a chapel on the campus of the college, although he did allow for various sects to build chapels just off-campus.¹¹⁹

Furthermore, Palin claimed that agnostics or atheists are incapable of being the virtuous citizens expected by the Constitution:

If you lose that foundation, John Adams was implicitly warning us, then we will not follow our constitution, there will be no reason to follow our constitution because it is a moral and religious people who understand that there is something greater than self, we are to live selflessly, and we are to be held accountable by our creator, so that is what our constitution is based on, so those revisionists, those in the lamestream media, especially, who would want to ignore what our founders actually thought, felt and wrote about in our charters of liberty – well, that's why I call them the lamestream media.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Lepore, 14.

¹¹⁷ Gettys.

¹¹⁸ Gettys.

¹¹⁹ Onuf, 161.

¹²⁰ Gettys.

Such an understanding of morality and virtue is typical of conservative evangelicals, who believe that one cannot be in possession of righteous morals without being religious.

Palin also made further claims of having Jefferson on her side. One of them was that Jefferson would agree with her about the importance of Christmas as a public holiday and how essential it is to keep Jesus in the American public sphere:

He would recognize those who would want to try to ignore that Jesus is the reason for the season, those who would want to try to abort Christ from Christmas. He would recognize that, for the most part, these are angry atheists armed with an attorney. They are not the majority of Americans.¹²¹

Palin's assertions that she had Jefferson on her side naturally led to reactions from liberals who believe that Jefferson is the champion of separation of church and state. In the *Wisconsin State Journal*, Cynthia Tucker, a professor at the University of Georgia, wrote an op-ed that clearly shows a different understanding of Jefferson, religious freedom, and Christianity than that of Sarah Palin:

Thomas Jefferson, who coined the phrase 'wall of separation between church and state,' was a believer, but not of the sort that Palin would recognize. While he had great respect for Jesus' moral teachings, for example, he did not believe in Christ's divinity. Jefferson might be surprised by the religious pluralism of the nation he helped to birth, but his wisdom has held up well through the centuries. Government does not endorse any religious view, so public school teachers should not lead public prayers. Let me also clear up a common misunderstanding: Students are free to pray on their own in public schools, and many do.

Another point made by Tucker is that "Government buildings should not include any Christian inscriptions unless they include those of other religions. Churches, mosques and synagogues, however, are free to display what they like, and they do."

Finally, Tucker argues that the War on Christmas that the neo-conservatives want to fight back against, is not the one that is most harmful to Christians and the real spirit of Christmas. Saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" does not really cause anyone any real harm. The commercialization of Christmas, however, should be the main enemy of Christians, according to Tucker:

¹²¹ Ibid.

I know many committed Christians who struggle to keep sacred the meaning of the season. But they don't do that by railing against what they hear clerks say to patrons in the malls. They try to stay out of the malls. When the "war" focuses on the real enemies of Christmas – endless commercialization and mindless consumerism – I'll enlist.¹²²

Obviously, Tucker's version of Jefferson and of Christianity is about as different from Palin's as it comes. Ironically, the commercialization of Christmas has been embraced by some conservatives as a positive development. Most noticeably, perhaps, is Bill O'Reilly's praise of the amount of money Americans spend each Christmas. On his television show, O'Reilly shouted out in what seemed like a combination of astonishment and pride that "in 2013, this year, Americans will spend about *six hundred billion dollars* on the Christmas holiday! Six hundred billion!"¹²³ Such a positive emphasis from O'Reilly on the commercialization of Christmas is perhaps no surprise, given his commitment to laissez-faire capitalism and his claims that the Founding Fathers built America on the principles of Christianity and capitalism.¹²⁴ Moreover, Sarah Palin stated in an interview on *Today* that she loves "the commercialization of Christmas because it spreads the Christmas cheer. It's the most jolly holiday, obviously, on our calendar."¹²⁵

Political satirist Jon Stewart added to Tucker's criticism of the religious right's embracement of the commercialization of Christmas by presenting Pope Francis as the "nemesis" of O'Reilly and Palin: "If the true spirit of Christmas is best spread and expressed through commercialism and materialism, then anyone who denounces those things is ... waging war on Christmas. Sarah Palin, Bill O'Reilly, meet your newest nemesis." Then Stewart goes on to play a clip from CBS News, which states that Pope Francis has "denounced trickle-down economics as unfair to the poor" and is "calling for Catholics everywhere to resist excessive capitalism and materialism." Following the clip, Stewart asks: "When will the Pope stop his War on Christmas?"¹²⁶

Americans United for Separation of Church and State were outraged by Palin's claims that Jefferson would complain about the War on Christmas. As an organization, Americans

¹²² Cynthia Tucker, "Cynthia Tucker: 'War' on Christmas ignores holiday's history," in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 23, 2013, accessed October 25, 2014.

http://host.madison.com/news/opinion/column/guest/cynthia-tucker-war-on-christmas-ignores-holiday-s-history/article_4a243b26-8d11-58cc-b7e0-faa0fc0b62fb.html

¹²³ O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, December 17, 2013.

¹²⁴ O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior*, 14-19.

¹²⁵ Sarah Palin, *Today*, NBC, November 11, 2013.

¹²⁶ Stewart.

United take great pride in continuing what they see as the struggle started by Thomas Jefferson to secure religious liberty and keep church and state separated: “Americans United for Separation of Church and State continues the struggle that Thomas Jefferson and the Baptists initiated more than 200 years ago.”¹²⁷

The blog on the home page of Americans United is even called *Wall of Separation*, as a clear reference to Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists. Furthermore, a passage from the letter, artistically stenciled to look like Jefferson’s handwriting, is the background of the heading on the organization’s blog: “I contemplate with great reverence that act of the whole American people [which] ... built a wall of separation between church and state.”¹²⁸ In response to Palin’s comments about Jefferson, Simon Brown wrote the following in *Wall of Separation*:

It also seems Palin fancies herself an expert on Thomas Jefferson, but given that she attended at least four different colleges over the span of six years before finally attaining an undergraduate degree from the University of Idaho in 1987, it’s no surprise that she is completely wrong about him, too ... And it’s no surprise that Palin in particular has to make up stories about Jefferson agreeing with her on Christmas, because the reality is that by inflaming the issue she sells more books. The bottom line is always the bottom line for Palin.¹²⁹

President of Americans United, Reverend Barry Lynn, added to the organization’s criticism of Palin in an appearance on *The Ed Show* on MSNBC, where he agreed with host Ed Schultz’s claims that “a war on religious freedom” would not “exist without Fox News propaganda.” For Lynn, “there is no war on Christianity in general, and there certainly is no War on Christmas.” Furthermore, Lynn went on to assert that Fox News has made up a “phony war” based on unverified stories of government oppression of religious expressions.¹³⁰ In addition, Lynn stated on American United’s blog that “people like Palin threaten to destroy the U.S. Constitution and true religious freedom, because they don’t

¹²⁷ Joseph L. Conn, “Dear Friends of Religious Freedom: A Timely Letter From Thomas Jefferson,” in *Wall of Separation*, December 24, 2010, accessed October 12, 2014. <https://au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/dear-friends-of-religious-freedom-a-timely-letter-from-thomas-jefferson>

¹²⁸ *Wall of Separation*, <https://au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation>, accessed October 12, 2014.

¹²⁹ Simon Brown, “Sarah Saves Christmas! Former Alaska Gov. Says Thomas Jefferson Would Oppose Atheist-Led ‘War on Christmas’,” in *Wall of Separation*, December 9, 2013, accessed October 12, 2014. <https://www.au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/sarah-saves-christmas-former-alaska-gov-says-thomas-jefferson-would-oppose>

¹³⁰ Lynn, *The Ed Show*, MSNBC, November 15, 2013.

understand how harmful it is to assume all soldiers are Christian or to put up sectarian symbols on government property.”¹³¹

A protest to such symbols on public property was precisely what took place in Santa Monica, California in 2011 and 2012. For more than half a century, the city of Santa Monica had allowed for a life-size nativity scene at Palisades Park. The display included fourteen different scenes that covered a whole block along the beachfront. In 2011, a lottery system was introduced to let 21 different groups put up various displays. Incidentally, 18 of these were allotted to atheist groups, one of which had decorated a display with a quotation attributed to Thomas Jefferson: “Religions are all alike – founded upon fables and mythologies.”¹³² In 2012, however, after a campaign launched by several atheist activist groups, the city council decided that religious displays could not be allowed on public property anymore and that no displays would be put up that year. Among the groups who led the protest campaign were the Freedom From Religion Foundation and American Atheists.¹³³ A lawsuit with the goal of removing the ban put in place by the Santa Monica City Council was brought to a federal judge in Los Angeles by the Santa Monica Nativity Scenes Committee, but failed.¹³⁴

Damon Vix represents the Freedom from Religion Foundation and has been at forefront of the protests and has erected many of the atheist displays, including the one with the Jefferson quote. Apparently, the tactics used by Vix and his allies has inspired what might be a new approach for atheists and secularists all over America. According to *Time Magazine*, atheist groups “demanding equal access seems to be growing.” The Freedom from Religion Foundation “has encouraged its 17,000 member to put up antireligious displays next to Nativity scenes on public property.” It could seem like the hope of the Freedom from Religion Foundation is that such a strategy will cause just as much fuss and commotion as in Santa Monica. If displays from certain religious groups are allowed on public property, than other groups must be allowed to put theirs up as well, so that no group is being denied freedom of speech. Consequently, local governments would rather ban both religious and

¹³¹ Lynn.

¹³² Guy Adams, “Santa Monica’s angry atheists declare a real war on Christmas,” in *The Independent*, December 15, 2011, accessed October 12, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/santa-monica-as-atheists-declare-a-real-war-on-christmas-6276970.html>

¹³³ Rory Carroll, “Atheist victory in California as surf city loses its nativity display,” in *The Observer*, December 1, 2012, accessed October 12, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/01/santa-monica-nativity-scene-atheist>

¹³⁴ Ian Lovett, “Federal Judge Denies Request to Block Nativity Ban,” in *The New York Times*, November 19, 2012, accessed October 12, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/us/federal-judge-denies-request-to-block-nativity-ban.html?_r=0

non-religious displays during the holiday season than having to deal with all the problems that could follow with allowing for all sorts of displays.

Hunter Jameson, the leader of the Santa Monica Nativity Scenes Committee, argued that both their religious liberty and freedom of speech had been infringed upon:

It's a sad day for freedom of speech and freedom of religion when a very small group of people with an ideological ax to grind succeed in censoring the greatest story ever told. It's even sadder when a city government like the City Council in Santa Monica goes along with this effort to trample on freedom of expression.¹³⁵

Vix also claims to have the Founding Fathers on his side and to have had his rights infringed upon: "I strongly believe in government and have my whole life, and our founding fathers created the separation of church and state. If we don't exercise our rights, we lose them. So I really felt the need to highlight the inherent problem."¹³⁶ Yet again it is obvious how different understandings of the American Creed, and that of Jefferson's views on religious freedom, play into the Culture Wars.

As it turned out, Vix's use of the Jefferson quotation caused uproar among conservatives when it became clear that the quote with the wording used by Vix couldn't be verified as a genuine Jefferson quotation.¹³⁷ Vix himself admitted that he couldn't authenticate the quote, but stated that he thought that, "it's close to what he believed, and it's probably taken a little bit out of context at most."¹³⁸

In response to the Santa Monica nativity scene controversy, the First Amendment Center's Charles C. Haynes wrote:

Whenever government creates a public forum, it can't bar purely private religious expression. Atheists have established that the First Amendment creates a level playing

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Jennifer Medina, "Where Crèches Once Stood, Atheists Now Hold Forth," in *The New York Times*, December 21, 2011, accessed October 12, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/22/us/santa-monica-nativity-scenes-replaced-by-atheists.html?_r=0

¹³⁷ "Superstition of Christianity (Quotation)," *Monticello.org*: "Some sources cite this quotation as being from a letter from Jefferson to a 'Dr. Woods;' others claim it was to William Short (sometimes with the additional detail of the year 1820), and still others do not cite a specific document. None of these citations has proven to be legitimate. Jefferson does use the word 'superstition' and even the phrase 'our particular superstition' in discussions of religion, most notably in a letter to William Short of April 13, 1820 (perhaps the source of the mis-citation above), but never in this particular formulation."
<http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/superstition-christianity-quotation>

¹³⁸ Michael Martinez and Zohreen Adamjee, "On California coast, atheists nudge out Nativity scenes," *CNN*, December 23, 2011, accessed October 18, 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/22/us/california-nativity-atheists/>

field. If religious groups get space in public parks or government buildings, then so must other groups – including in December. So now that we all understand that a right for one is a right for all, maybe it's time for atheist groups to declare victory and stay home for the holidays. Let Christian groups set up Nativity displays in public spaces unanswered in December – and save the atheist messages for another time of year. Yes, I understand why atheists want to make sure that religion isn't privileged by government in the public square (as it has been for much of our history). But at some point (and Santa Monica has surely reached it) in-your-face tactics become counterproductive and needlessly divisive. After all, whether we celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, the winter solstice or none of the above, we can all benefit from a more civil and peaceful public square.¹³⁹

What Haynes argues certainly makes a lot of sense, and in many ways echoes the points made by Fiorina. Perhaps the War on Christmas, as part of the broader Culture Wars, is just blown out of proportion by activist groups with extreme views on both sides of the issues, while most Americans would rather agree with an approach like Haynes' instead of getting rid of religious or non-religious expressions in the public square all together?

A similar controversy to the one in Santa Monica took place in Florida's Capitol, where the state government allows for any group to display approved art or messages. Next to a nativity scene, the Freedom from Religion Foundation hung a banner that pictured a different nativity scene: Thomas Jefferson along with James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and the Statue of Liberty gathered around the Bill of Rights in a cradle. Part of the text on the banner read: "Let us also honor the birth of our Bill of Rights, which reminds us there can be no freedom OF religion without having freedom FROM religion in government." A spokesperson for the Freedom from Religion Foundation said that they did not believe "there should be religion or irreligion in any state Capitol, but if they're going to start allowing religion and call it a public forum then certainly the non-religious point of view should be there, too." Pam Olsen, the leader of a nativity scene event in the Capitol rotunda, on the other hand, claimed that she and her sympathizers were "fighting for religious freedom for this younger generation. Religious freedoms are under attack in our nation."¹⁴⁰

Consequently, it is evident that there are battles in the War on Christmas taking place all over the United States, but often some of the parties involved tend to be activists from the more extreme sides of the debate. Presented with such information, it could seem like only

¹³⁹ Charles C. Haynes, "Inside the First Amendment – In Christmas wars, it's all or nothing," in the *Nebraska City News-Press*, November 29, 2012, accessed October 26, 2014.

<http://www.ncnewspress.com/article/20121129/NEWS/121129923?template=printart>

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Weber, "Atheists Set Up Display at Fla.'s Capitol Building to Combat Nativity Scene," in *The Christian Post*, December 6, 2013, accessed October 26, 2014. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/atheists-set-up-display-at-fla-s-capitol-building-to-combat-nativity-scene-110101/>

the polarized activists are fighting each other in Culture War battles, but that the majority of people really do not get so riled up. Therefore, one could argue that Fiorina is right and Hunter is wrong. At the same time, however, more moderate and all-encompassing organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State are also active in the War on Christmas debate.

To Bill O'Reilly, Sarah Palin, and other neo-conservatives, their version of Christianity and their version of American values and traditions are essential parts of the American Creed. However, the same is true of many liberals. Since the American Creed is what is at the very core of what it means to be an American, most Americans want to identify their culture, beliefs, traditions, opinions, and interpretations with the Founders. The reactions to Palin and O'Reilly's claims from organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, proves that the American Creed and having Jefferson on your side appears to be just as important to liberals as well.

According to Edwin Gaustad, "no other president has been appealed to more frequently or more fervently in religious matters than Jefferson."¹⁴¹ Therefore, it makes complete sense that many Americans, "left, right, or center" would "deploy the Founding Fathers."¹⁴² In the case of religious matters, Jefferson is the Founding Father most commonly associated with religious freedom. In this context, Joseph Ellis' remarks about how Jefferson "guards the American Creed" and how the "bottomless and unconditional love for Jefferson at the grass roots level" is "impervious to historical argument or evidence" making the "quest for the historical Jefferson" just as difficult a task as the "quest for the historical Jesus" makes it apparent how Jefferson has become a figure in the minds of the public that truly does transcend "*all* political conflicts and parties." According to Ellis, Jefferson has "ceased to function as the liberal half of the American political dialogue." Conservatives want to claim Jefferson as the champion of their cause just as much as liberals. Hence Jefferson can no longer be seen as the "symbolic leader of liberal partisans fighting valiantly against the entrenched elites."¹⁴³ Being such an important figure to many Americans, Jefferson is interpreted so that he is aligned with whatever beliefs and views people want him to promote on their behalf.

¹⁴¹ Gaustad, xiii.

¹⁴² Lepore.

¹⁴³ Ellis, 9-15.

Jefferson's views on Christmas and Public Holidays

So, what was Jefferson's stance on Christmas as a public holiday? Is it clearly evident – as Sarah Palin claims – that if he were alive today, he would “go on Fox News to complain about the War on Christmas?”¹⁴⁴ Or perhaps Jefferson would be more in line with Barry Lynn, who believes “it's not all right to force your faith on other people. If that's wrong, then I guess our Founding Fathers were wrong, too.”¹⁴⁵

Of course, one cannot be certain what a Founding Father who died almost 200 years ago would think of anything in present-day American society. Furthermore, there are few clear indications as to what Jefferson thought about Christmas and its position as a holiday in American public life. First of all, Christmas was not celebrated or regarded as an important holiday by many Americans. Secondly, the Founders must not have thought that Christmas should have the status of an important holiday, at least not nationally, since it did not become a federal holiday until 1870. And finally, since Christmas was not considered an important, national holiday, it wasn't really up for debate in Jefferson's time how it should be celebrated publicly and if the government should be involved or not. Therefore, finding a clear Jeffersonian stance on the War on Christmas, is not as straightforward as either Palin or Lynn claim it to be.

What one can delve into, though, is some of Jefferson's religious beliefs pertaining to Christmas and what he thought about religious holidays being part of the public sphere under the auspices of the government. In that way, it is perhaps possible to put two and two together and find some indication as to whether Jefferson would agree with Palin or Lynn.

First of all – as the chapter on Jefferson's religious beliefs and his views on the separation of church and state has already made clear – it is obvious that Jefferson would not adhere to some mainstream Christian beliefs commonly associated with Christmas in America today. Jefferson did not believe in miracles, and thus could not accept the concepts of virgin birth or the incarnation of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In *The Jefferson Bible*, Jefferson kept Luke's account of Mary giving birth to Jesus: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”¹⁴⁶ However, Jefferson has left out “the appearance of an

¹⁴⁴ Gettys.

¹⁴⁵ Lynn.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 13.

angel to the shepherds watching over their flocks, as well as the heavenly host singing ‘Glory to God in the highest.’”¹⁴⁷

It does, however, seem clear that privately, Jefferson celebrated Christmas and cherished the holiday. With Jefferson having been brought up with the traditions of the Anglican Church, this makes sense; just like some people today who are not necessarily devout Christians still celebrate Christmas as an important religious holiday. At Monticello the holiday was observed with great reverence – even the slaves got several days off of regular work and were allowed to travel and visit friends and families at other plantations.¹⁴⁸ Jefferson himself described the holiday as “the day of greatest mirth and jollity.”¹⁴⁹ The celebrations included gifts and special food, such as mince pie.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, the museum at Monticello stresses the fact that the now very famous Christmas carol “Adeste fideles,” or “O, Come All Ye Faithful” as the English translation of the lyrics from 1841 is called, was one of Jefferson’s favorite pieces of music.¹⁵¹ One would also have to assume that Jefferson – who considered himself a follower of Jesus, although not in the same way as many Christians then or today – must have felt that celebrating the birth of Jesus should be considered to be of importance.

Nevertheless, believing in something and celebrating a holiday privately does not automatically mean that one would want these beliefs and celebrations to be part of the government’s sphere. As president, Jefferson did not want to proclaim a national day of fasting and prayer as requested by Reverend Samuel Miller. Articulating his skepticism towards getting the presidency and the government involved in religious activities, Jefferson wrote to Miller: “I consider the government of the U.S. as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises.” Moreover, Jefferson asserted that he as president did not have the right to “assume to the U.S. an authority over religious exercises which the Constitution has directly precluded them from.” Additionally, Jefferson worried that if the president was to recommend a day of

¹⁴⁷ Vicchio, 102.

¹⁴⁸ Joel Yancey, Poplar Forest, to Thomas Jefferson, December 24, 1818: “Your two boys Dick and Moses arrived here on Monday night last [Dec. 21]. Both on horse back without a pass, but said they had your permission to visit their friends here this Xmass.” http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/christmas#Christmas_in_the_Enslaved_Community_28Primary_Source_References.29

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Jefferson to John Page, December 25, 1762, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 733.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Mary Lewis, December 25, 1813, in *Founders Online, National Archives* (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0041>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 7, 28 November 1813 to 30 September 1814, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 78.

¹⁵¹ Guided tour of Monticello on November 13, 2013. See also the “Collections of Jefferson Family Music” held at the *University of Virginia Special Collections* at <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/dmmc/Music/Cripe/cripe.html#family>.

fasting and prayer to the public, it would “carry some authority,” and that anyone who did not take part in such an event might risk some sort of punishment, “not indeed of fine and imprisonment, but of some degree of proscription perhaps in public opinion.”¹⁵²

Therefore, it seems fairly clear that Jefferson would not approve of the government favoring Christianity by taking part in the holiday celebrations. However, one would also have to assume that Jefferson, a staunch believer in individual rights, religious freedom, and freedom of speech, would approve of Christmas celebrations – or any other religious, secular, cultural, or political gatherings or celebrations – taking place freely in the public sphere as long as these are not ordered, funded, or organized by the government.

Conclusion

The War on Christmas is very much a part of the broader Culture Wars in the United States. The media in general, not just Fox News, focus on the War on Christmas every holiday season. Furthermore, court cases such as *Lynch v. Donnelly* and legislation show that there is a clear divide between those who feel that Christianity is being neglected and suppressed in the public sphere and those who feel that Christianity is getting too much support, that there has to be a clear separation of church and state, and that no particular creed should be favored.

What most of the battlefields of the War on Christmas have in common is that both sides are arguing that their First Amendment rights are being violated. Moreover, both sides often call upon Thomas Jefferson – an American icon and the champion of religious liberty – to add strength to their arguments. When such diverse public figures as Bill O’Reilly, Sarah Palin, Damon Vix, and Barry Lynn all refer to the Founding Fathers and Thomas Jefferson it truly demonstrates just how colossal the impact of the American Creed and Jefferson as a national icon is in the present-day Culture Wars.

¹⁵² Thomas Jefferson to Rev. Samuel Miller, January 23, 1808, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1186-1187.

CHAPTER 4

Religion and Education

On July 24, 2014, Bill O'Reilly lashed out against public education in the United States. Thomas Jefferson would be outraged at the leftist teaching of American history: "If only President Jefferson could take a glance at the country he helped create ... Schools are no longer teaching history, geography or civics in an effective way. Too many curricula are more focused on America's alleged past sins, not on the wonders of this grand experiment."¹⁵³ O'Reilly's criticism of a public school system destroyed by liberals is echoed in Glenn Beck's new book *Conform: Exposing the Truth About Common Core and Public Education*.¹⁵⁴ A resident of Concord, New Hampshire had a letter printed in the *Concord Monitor* on May 28, 2014, where she stated: "Anyone who loves children and education should read *Conform* by Glenn Beck. He has summed up what most thinking parents have known. He states that America was founded on the belief that people receive their rights from God, not the government."¹⁵⁵ Contrary to this reaction is that of educator and author Ron Briley, who criticizes Beck for being a man of "blind patriotism" who glosses over the "subjugation of the environment and Native Americans, racial slavery, intolerance, exploitation of labor, and global imperialism" to present a "story of triumphant expansionism." Furthermore, Briley asks rhetorically if Beck's views on education could actually be "the type of America envisioned by Jefferson?"¹⁵⁶

The typical right wing views that O'Reilly and Beck present, and the very different reactions to these all show that that the Culture Wars are taking a hold of public education. What children and teenagers are taught about religion and American history is important to both conservatives and liberals. Moreover, how the founding of America is viewed and presented in curricula in public schools is essential. Whether or not the liberal or conservative ideals are reconciled with those of the Founding Fathers, and Thomas Jefferson in particular, appears to be of great importance to a wide range of Americans.

¹⁵³ O'Reilly, "Ignorance is Not Bliss," *Billoreilly.com*, July 24, 2014, accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.billoreilly.com/newslettercolumn?pid=43460>

¹⁵⁴ Glenn Beck and Kyle Olson, *Conform: Exposing the Truth About Common Core and Public Education* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2014).

¹⁵⁵ Melissa May, "Glenn Beck has it right," in the *Concord Monitor*, May 28, 2014, accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.concordmonitor.com/opinion/12152678-95/letter-glenn-beck-has-it-right>

¹⁵⁶ Ron Briley, "Glenn Beck's History Lesson: Amnesia and Conformity," *History News Network*, August 31, 2010, accessed November 10, 2014. <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/130820#sthash.Sfei4Odz.dpuf>

This chapter starts with introducing the battle over textbook standards for the public school system in Texas in 2010, which is a recent example of how the Culture Wars are being fought in the realm of education. Moreover, this chapter explores the development of the changing role of religion in public education in American history. Furthermore, this chapter examines different approaches to public education, ranging from the religious right to neo-atheists. Finally, the chapter goes back to the case of the Texas textbook war and the prolific leader of the right wing organization WallBuilders, David Barton. Both right wingers such as Barton and neo-atheists such as Christopher Hitchens claim to have Thomas Jefferson on their side.

The Texas Textbook War

In 2010 the Texas State Board of Education approved new textbook standards for economics, history, and social studies from the elementary to the high school level that would affect not only the content of textbooks in Texas, but throughout the United States for the following decade. Texas revises its statewide textbook standards every ten years. The state is one of the largest buyers of textbooks. Since Texas is a major market, American textbook publishers adjust their books according to the Texas standards. These textbooks are sold nationwide. Thus, the decisions made by the Texas Board of Education have implications for school children and teachers across the country. Therefore, Texans from both the conservative and liberal side of the political spectrum view the textbook standards as highly important in regards to shaping the way young Americans are educated about their culture and history.

The conservatives on the Texas State Board of Education started their endeavor to change textbook standards in 2009, when they sought to approve a new science curriculum that would require science teachers to treat creationism as just a scientifically sound theory as evolution, as well as questioning the reality of global warming.¹⁵⁷ During a Sunday school class at his local Grace Bible Church, The Texas State Board of Education's chairman, dentist and Sunday school teacher Dr. Don McLeroy who is a young earth creationist and conservative evangelical, taught the kids the following:

There are some people who would argue that we're not a Christian nation, that our nation is not founded on Biblical principles. These people are called secular humanists. And they say there is no truth. They say there is no God. And they say that

¹⁵⁷ Katherine Mangan, "Evolution Skeptics Lose 2 Planks but Retain a Foothold in Texas Science Policy," in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28, 2009, accessed August 31, 2014. <http://chronicle.com/article/Evolution-Skeptics-Lose-2-P/42646/>

we just evolved ... So, which principles are our country founded on? We're founded on Biblical principles ... Do you know why I'm teaching you this lesson? I don't want the principles that this country was founded on to die and disgrace our Founding Fathers. I want you all to take the banner and carry it forward. This entire country is built on these principles. If we turn away from these principles, will we keep the country we have? No! And they're under attack, which you'll see in a minute.¹⁵⁸

McLeroy's opinions on what America was at the time of its founding and what it should be in the future are undoubtedly his main motivation for serving on the Texas State Board of Education. In other words, the conservative Evangelical interpretation of the American Creed that McLeroy and his allies on the Texas State Board of Education are promoting is the driving force behind the changes that they set out make with the textbook standards.

With the new 2009 science curriculum and the battle over the 2010 social studies curriculum, there is a clear shift from previous standards, which were based on professional advice from academia and teachers, to a politicized process where promoting a conservative Evangelical world-view seems to be the overarching goal. The *New York Times Magazine* reported on the 2010 process: "The injection of partisan politics into education went so far that at one point another Republican board member burst out in seemingly embarrassed exasperation, 'Guys, you're rewriting history now!' Nevertheless, most of McLeroy's proposed amendments passed by a show of hands."¹⁵⁹

Having turned the new textbook standards into a culture war over how America's history should be told, the conservative bloc of the board remained victorious. After the voting was over, the board's chairman and leader of its conservative faction, McLeroy, pointed out: "We're adding balance. History has already been skewed. Academia is skewed too far to the left."¹⁶⁰ According to the *New York Times*, Cynthia Dunbar, a member of the Texas Board of Education "who is a strict constitutionalist and thinks the nation was founded on Christian beliefs, managed to cut Thomas Jefferson from a list of figures whose writings inspired revolutions in the late 18th century and 19th century, replacing him with St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and Sir William Blackstone."¹⁶¹ Dunbar was also quoted saying she does not believe anyone "can read the history of our country without realizing that the Good

¹⁵⁸ *The Revisionaries*, directed by Scott Thurman (New York, Kino Lorber, 2012), DVD.

¹⁵⁹ Russell Shorto, "How Christian Were the Founders?" in the *New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 2010, accessed August 31, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14texbooks-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

¹⁶⁰ James C. McKinley, Jr., "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change," in the *New York Times*, March 12, 2010, accessed August 23, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html?_r=1&

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Book and the spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses.”¹⁶² However, Thomas Jefferson was put back on this list in the curriculum at the last minute after massive protests.¹⁶³

During the adoption process of the new social studies standards, Democratic board member Mavis B. Knight, proposed an amendment with the following wording: “Examine the reasons the Founding Fathers protected religious freedom in America by barring government from promoting or disfavoring any particular religion over all others.” Cynthia Dunbar passionately fought Knight’s amendment, insisting that “this debate is too broad and one of the things we keep being hounded by the other side is that the conservatives are trying to inject religion into the TEKS. No, we’re not! But nor do we want our religious history to be tainted and drawn from a viewpoint that is not historically accurate.” Knight’s amendment was voted down by a 10 to 5 win.¹⁶⁴

The reactions from liberals were naturally quite different from those of McLeroy and Dunbar. The Texas Freedom Network, an organization whose mission is to advance a “mainstream agenda of religious freedom and individual liberties to counter the religious right” was deeply opposed to the new textbook standards.¹⁶⁵ *Aol.News* reported that the Texas Freedom Network was outraged:

By dropping mention of revolution, and substituting figures such as Aquinas and Calvin for Jefferson, the Texas Freedom Network argues, the board had chosen to embrace religious teachings over those of Jefferson, the man who coined the phrase “separation between church and state.”¹⁶⁶

In addition, the president of the Texas Freedom Network, Kathy Miller, told the local Fox News 7 TV channel that she was “stunned that this board rejected teaching students about the First Amendment of the Constitution’s protections for religious freedom in this country ... particularly since they’ve been proclaiming American Exceptionalism, and this one of our

¹⁶² Katherine Mangan, “Ignoring Experts’ Pleas, Texas Board Approves Controversial Curriculum Standards,” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 23, 2010, accessed August 31, 2014. <http://chronicle.com/article/Texas-Board-Approves/65661/>

¹⁶³ Terrence Stutz, “Texas State Board of Education approves new curriculum standards,” in the *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 2010, accessed September 10, 2014. <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/headlines/20100521-Texas-State-Board-of-Education-approves-9206.ece>

¹⁶⁴ *The Revisionaries*.

¹⁶⁵ *Texas Freedom Network*. http://www.tfn.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_mission

¹⁶⁶ David Knowles, “Texas Yanks Thomas Jefferson From Teaching Standard” in *Aol.News*, March 12, 2010, accessed July 26, 2014. <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/03/12/texas-removes-thomas-jefferson-from-teaching-standard/>

nation's founding principles that sets us apart.”¹⁶⁷ Yet again, the clash over textbook standards unmistakably manifests itself as a Culture War battle over the meaning of the American Creed and American Exceptionalism.

The well-regarded historian Eric Foner criticized the textbook standards in *The Nation*:

Judging from the updated social studies curriculum, conservatives want students to come away from a Texas education with a favorable impression of: women who adhere to traditional gender roles, the Confederacy, some parts of the Constitution, capitalism, the military and religion. They do not think students should learn about women who demanded greater equality; other parts of the Constitution; slavery, Reconstruction and the unequal treatment of nonwhites generally; environmentalists; labor unions; federal economic regulation; or foreigners.¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, Foner claims that the Texas State Board of Education “seeks to inculcate children with a history that celebrates the achievements of our past while ignoring its shortcomings, and that largely ignores those who have struggled to make this a fairer, more equal society.”¹⁶⁹ Finally, Foner predicts a sad future for Texans if the new textbook standards become the norm for the next decades: “I have lectured on a number of occasions to Texas precollege teachers and have found them as competent, dedicated and open-minded as the best teachers anywhere. But if they are required to adhere to the revised curriculum, the students of our second most populous state will emerge ill prepared for life in Texas, America and the world in the twenty-first century.”¹⁷⁰

Although many liberals claim that they – unlike the conservatives – are not trying to infuse a biased version of history into the textbook standards, it is nevertheless clearly evident that there are two competing visions of the American Creed at play in the textbook wars.

Schools and Religion in American History

Politically motivated people influencing the content of textbooks through putting pressure on or taking control of school boards is not a new phenomenon, especially not in Texas. In the 1960s, the Texan couple Mel and Norma Gabler “had developed a small-growth industry

¹⁶⁷ *The Revisionaries*.

¹⁶⁸ Eric Foner, “Twisting History in Texas” in *The Nation*, March 18, 2010, accessed August 17, 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/article/twisting-history-texas#>

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

evaluating American history and other textbooks from a right-wing, religiously fundamentalist point of view and appearing before state and local school boards to oppose the adoption of materials tainted in their view with Marxism, evolutionism, and secular humanism.”¹⁷¹ The Gablers founded the organization Education Research Analysts and started questioning and criticizing what they saw as leftist and secular agendas of new textbooks. According to *The New York Times*, the Gablers “were first to seize on the Texas textbook process as a means of pushing their conservative principles, and their success baffled and angered civil liberties advocates and progressive educators. Publishers, with much to lose if Texas rejected their books, were often willing to make changes to please the Gablers.”¹⁷²

The Gablers did not only influence textbook standards in Texas. In 1974, the board of education in Kanawha County, West Virginia, was about to approve new textbooks recommended by the state. These were books that followed the changing focus in academia of the late 60s and early 70s towards multiculturalism and presenting various groups and views in American society, not just conservative, white culture. Most board members thought the approval process would be only a formality; they were used to following the guidelines of the state’s educational professionals. However, Alice Moore, a board member and the wife of a conservative fundamentalist Christian minister, complained that the new textbooks were overflowing with “coarse language,” and that they were “anti-Christian and anti-American.” The biggest problem, according to Moore, was that the new textbooks “encouraged students to question the values of their parents and community.”¹⁷³ Moore launched her attack on the new curricula after receiving advice from Mel and Norma Gabler. The textbook controversy in Kanawha County eventually got out of hand when the school board’s building was bombed by fundamentalists, parents started boycotting the schools, one person died, and the Ku Klux Klan took to the streets protesting the new books.¹⁷⁴

Nonetheless, the history of public schools and religion in America go back to colonial times. Prothero asserts that it is a myth that “once upon a time public education was secular.”

¹⁷¹ Nash et al, 116.

¹⁷² Douglas Martin, “Norma Gabler, Leader of Crusade on Textbooks, Dies at 84,” in *The New York Times*, August 1, 2007. Accessed September 7, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/01/education/01gabler.html?_r=2&oref=slogin.&

¹⁷³ Stephen Smith, “The Great Textbook Wars,” in *American RadioWorks*, American Public Media, 2010, Accessed September 7, 2014. <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/textbooks/index.html>

¹⁷⁴ Rick Perlstein, “Nothing New under the Wingnut Sun: ‘Textbook Wars’,” in *The Nation*, February 11, 2013, accessed September 7, 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/blog/172784/nothing-new-under-wingnut-sun-textbook-wars#>

In colonial America and later on the early United States, the “curriculum emphasized religion in a manner that doubtless would be ruled unconstitutional today.” Furthermore, Prothero claims that in contemporary American society a lot of people think of “public schools as religion-free zones, as if the First Amendment guarantees not freedom of religion, but freedom from it.” As turns out, though, “in early America, religion permeated the classroom.” Several scholars, such as historian Jennifer Monaghan and philosopher Warren Nord, emphasize the fact that in American education in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth century, the main purpose was to educate good Christian citizens. As the system of public schools expanded and developed in the nineteenth century, these schools promoted a “gospel of Protestant republicanism” in alliance with the Protestant establishment and a “‘Benevolent Empire’ of nondenominational voluntary associations dedicated to improving the world through peace, temperance, abolitionism, and other social reforms.” These schools taught students to “revere George Washington as a saint and Jesus as a Christ.” The goal for the public schools was not just to educate “good citizens, but good Protestants.”¹⁷⁵ In fact, until Thomas Jefferson established the University of Virginia in 1819, most American universities were founded with the main goal of educating clergy for specific Protestant denominations, where theology was always the most important academic discipline.

Even though public schools were preaching Protestant Christianity to their students, the First Amendment still affected the curriculum, but perhaps not in the way we would imagine today. In 1827, Massachusetts passed a law making it illegal to use public funds on textbooks that were “calculated to favour any particular religious sect or tenet.” This nondenominational ideal was driven by both tolerance and intolerance, according to Prothero. On the one hand, the various Protestant denominations that had existed as part of the elite of the United States since its founding had a common interest in instilling Protestant republicanism into its future adult citizens. Tolerating various forms of Protestantism was after all what brought the Benevolent Empire together to work for common goals such as abolition or temperance. On the other hand, intolerance was just as important in uniting the various Protestant denominations. At a time when the number of Roman Catholics in the United States started increasing as a result of new waves of immigration from Ireland and Germany, uniting to combat this threat to democracy and civilized society became an extra incentive for many Protestants, to whom Catholicism was a “form of brainwashing incompatible with liberty, insisting that the Vatican’s refusal to allow Catholics to interpret

¹⁷⁵ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 87-92.

the Bible and church teachings for themselves amounted to spiritual tyranny.”¹⁷⁶

The nondenominational approach to religion in public schools was led and developed by one man in particular, Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837 to 1848. Mann, a Unitarian, believed that the public school was a “sacred temple of education,” where he focused on five components for the teaching of religion. First of all, teaching piety was essential in order to develop virtue. Secondly, the religious education could only feature “doctrines on which all Christians could agree.” The third component was to emphasize moral rather than dogmatic truths, in other words to teach what may be called “Golden Rule Christianity.” The fourth was to use the King James Bible, “without note or comment,” in order to avoid teaching specific theological interpretations. Finally, to not seem too secular, three religious rituals would be allowed in public schools: “Prayer, hymn singing, and devotional Bible reading”¹⁷⁷

Mann’s approach could actually be linked to some of Thomas Jefferson’s thoughts about public education. According to Peter Onuf, professor and Jefferson expert at the University of Virginia, Jefferson “promoted publicly supported education” in order to “provide a vigilant people” with the “tools they needed to secure their liberties.” Mann’s views on Christianity and its importance to democracy is reminiscent of some of Jefferson’s ideas:

Republicanism, the system of self-government that gave fullest scope to man’s innate moral sense, constituted the necessary means to achieve moral progress; the Christianity that Jesus taught – and that ‘Pseudo-Christians’ had perverted and corrupted throughout history – enabled republicans to grasp the deeper meanings and broader ethical implications of their various self-initiated pursuits. Republicanism and Christianity were perfectly complimentary.¹⁷⁸

Mann’s efforts to streamline the teaching of religion in public education therefore seems to be somewhat Jeffersonian, which is not surprising considering Mann was a Unitarian, the denomination Jefferson thought would soon be totally dominant as he wrote to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse in 1822: “I trust there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” In the same letter, Jefferson emphasized that “to love God with all

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 119.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 119-120.

¹⁷⁸ Peter S. Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 154-156.

thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.”¹⁷⁹ Such an emphasis on “Golden Rule Christianity” that focuses on morals and good deeds as a cornerstone of republicanism and civic virtue fits in very well with Bellah’s concept of civil religion. Stephen Prothero even goes so far as to brand Jefferson “the founding father of America’s extra Christian Jesus piety.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, one would have to say that even though Jefferson was a strong proponent of the separation of church and state, he at the same time appears to have been in favor of a virtuous citizenry that would receive their morals from the civic religion of a Christianity not “perverted and corrupted” by the irrational dogmas of priestcraft. In this context, Jefferson was mostly afraid of the combination of a powerful state and a powerful state church. The democratic and popular developments of churches that were taking place in the early nineteenth century seemed like positive progress to Jefferson, where eventually the citizens would become enlightened individuals able to think for themselves.

Mann’s nondenominational approach, however, was simply too vague for many Christians, especially for Catholics and evangelicals. Furthermore, it obviously excluded Jews and other religious or non-religious minorities outside the realm of conventional Christianity. For Catholics, one element of Mann’s approach in particular was clearly offensive. The fact that the King James Bible would be used for reading in school simply did not work for Catholics, who had their own version of the Bible, “based on the Latin Vulgate translation of the fourth and fifth centuries,” rather than newer translations of the original Hebrew and Greek scriptures that Protestants used. Furthermore, to read the Bible “without note or comment” was especially infuriating to Catholics, as the tradition and the authority of interpretations made by the Roman Catholic Church are essential to Catholics, who do not believe in “the Scripture alone” as Martin Luther put it.¹⁸¹

As a result of these disagreements over the teaching of religion in public schools, the “Bible Wars” between Protestants and Catholics transpired in the mid-nineteenth century. In Philadelphia, Protestant-Catholic riots in 1844 over which version of the Bible should be used in public schools resulted in the deaths of more than a dozen people and the burning of several Catholic churches. In New York City, Catholic bishop John Hughes complained that the public schools were clearly “Protestant and anti-Catholic.” Catholic requests for “public funds for Roman Catholic parochial schools” were denied. The Public School Society asserted that to fund Catholic schools “would create ‘an unholy alliance’ between church and

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1458-1459.

¹⁸⁰ Prothero, *American Jesus*, 14.

¹⁸¹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 121.

state.” The newspaper *American Protestant Vindicator* claimed that Catholics “demand of republicans to give them funds to train up their children to worship a ghostly monarchy of vicars, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and Popes!” Thus it was clear that the Protestant establishment in America feared that Catholics, who submitted themselves to a foreign, feudal system of tyrannical authority from the dark ages, could not be trusted to develop the virtue and enlightened spirit necessary to function as a citizen of a democratic republic.¹⁸²

As a consequence of the denial of public funding, Bishop Hughes, along with Jewish leaders in New York City, decided it would be better to demand “legislation that would mandate completely secular, Bible-free public education,” and leave the teaching of religion up to the various denominations in their respective Sunday schools. Another similar example was the decision by Cincinnati’s board of education to “outlaw hymn singing, Bible reading, and religious education from its public schools” in 1869 and 1870. In many public schools hymn singing, prayer, and Bible reading were kept in place, but usually these rituals were performed before school started and took the form of “vestigial civic rites” that did not really have any real significance or communicated a theological message. Thus, after the end of the Civil War, religion rather quickly started to disappear from public education and thus, according to Prothero, the “great exodus of religion from the minds of American citizens was under way.”¹⁸³

The apparently steady development of secularization of American public schools came to its culmination during the 1960s, when the U.S. Supreme Court banned prayer and devotional Bible reading in 1962 and 1963. However, along with the ruling in favor of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, conservative evangelicals were starting to realize that religion, or more specifically the moral values of conservative Christianity, could play a much more important role in American politics: “Democrats defended these rulings (and the freedoms of the counterculture) in the name of Thomas Jefferson, individual rights, public reason, and the first amendment. Republicans decried the same rulings (and the licentiousness of the counterculture) in the name of God, family values, revelation, and the Judeo-Christian tradition.” According to Stephen Prothero, until the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the United States could be seen as a “secular nation with a citizenry that, while individually religious, had nevertheless agreed to quarantine religion from the public square.” Starting with President Carter, public displays of religiousness and piety became part of presidential appearances. Since then, American presidential candidates have not been able to

¹⁸² Ibid, 121-122.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 122-127.

ignore the enormous power of this segment of voters. In Prothero's opinion, this general development of American society and politics also has something to do with a more Southern style among the presidents than the predominant New England upper-class style of previous times that "viewed public professions of religion as bad manners or bad faith." This phenomenon has occurred parallel with and almost in tandem with the development of the Northern states gradually losing much of their former influence to the emerging power of the Sunbelt and Bible belt of the Southern states.

With the election of Ronald Reagan, who was significantly helped to victory by the Moral Majority's mobilization of evangelical voters, religion had really found its way to the center of American politics. During the 1980s, religion and politics became increasingly intertwined and "born-again Christians swelled to over one-third of the population and preachers strutted their stuff (and their favorite political candidates) on Christian radio and television stations, religion became more conservative, more public, and more political." By the early 1990s, the Democrats had started to be seen as the secular party, while the Republicans were the "faith-based alternative." In the 1960s and 1970s, "religious affiliation" had been "politically irrelevant." In the 1992 Presidential Election, however, "frequent worshippers (those who attend religious congregations at least once a week) preferred Bush the Elder over Bill Clinton by 14 percentage points." This phenomenon, known as the "God gap," only continued to manifest itself, and in 2000 and 2004 the gap had extended to 20 percentage points.¹⁸⁴ In 1996, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Republican Newt Gingrich, proposed a Constitutional Amendment, known as the "Religious Freedom Amendment" that would have allowed school prayer, government funding of religious activities, as well as "permitted the display of religious symbols at the seat of government." The amendment was taken to a vote in the House of Representatives, but did not receive the minimum two-third majority required, due in part to massive protests from organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State.¹⁸⁵

Consequently, it makes sense that controversies surrounding religion in school and the teaching of American history has increased in intensity over the last five decades. During that time, conservative Christians have become a political force that has kept growing in numbers. Moreover, at the same time the divide between conservatives and liberals has also

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 51-53.

¹⁸⁵ Eric Schmitt, "Church Leaders Split on Plan for School Prayer Amendment," in the *New York Times*, July 24, 1996, accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/24/us/church-leaders-split-on-plan-for-school-prayer-amendment.html>

"Our Victories," *Americans United for Separation of Church and State*, accessed October 4, 2014. <https://www.au.org/about/our-victories>

kept widening, and present day American politics appear to be more polarized and entrenched than in a very long time. It is in this context of the Culture Wars that conservatives and liberals are battling over how American public schools deal with religion and how the religious history of the United States is taught.

According to the president of the First Amendment Center, Charles Haynes, everyone involved in trying to influence how religion is dealt with in public education in America must “acknowledge the failure of public education throughout our history to find a constitutionally permissible and educationally sound role for religion in the schools.” The problem with Jefferson and Mann, writes Haynes, was that, “Jefferson assumed that what he understood as ‘non-sectarian’ teaching about nature’s God was simply the truth of the matter.” Thus, when Mann “proposed ‘natural religion’ for the schools of Massachusetts,” in the nineteenth century, “and indeed a generalized Protestant curriculum lasted well into this century,” this led to the exclusion of so many other versions of Christianity.¹⁸⁶

When it comes to the issues that Haynes mentions, one school district in the United States has adapted what Haynes suggests as a solution. Modesto, California is apparently perhaps “the only public school district in the nation to require a class religions” with its world geography and religions course as part of the high school mandatory classes. The course, which only teaches about religion and does not promote any particular faith, has received a lot of praise and the State of California is now recommending that schools all over the state should consider similar courses. According to Cindy Marks, president of the Modesto City Schools Board, students had “more understanding of their own faith and became much more tolerant of other faiths” when they were finished with the course, and also “had a better understanding of cultural issues, even than adults.”¹⁸⁷ Such an approach to religion in American public schools might solve some of the current problems, where some feel that religion is being ignored completely and others feel that religion is being forced upon them. If everyone could come together and learn about different systems of beliefs that would probably help with some of the frustration on both sides. It is this kind of solution that Stephen Prothero suggests in *Religious Literacy* to solve what is a typically American lack of understanding of not just the beliefs of others, but also of one’s own.

¹⁸⁶ Haynes, “Beyond the Culture Wars,” in *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 1993/January 1994), 31.

¹⁸⁷ Nan Austin, “Modesto world religions course recognized in new book, state resolution,” in *The Modesto Bee*, September 14, 2014, accessed October 8, 2014. http://www.modbee.com/2014/09/14/3538976_modesto-world-religions-course.html?rh=1

Secularist Views on the Role of Religion

Just like some conservatives are trumpeting a biased version of American history or are trying to influence what role religion should play in public schools, so is also the case with some liberals. On the opposite side of the spectrum from neo-conservative evangelicals, one finds the so-called neo-atheists. Neo-atheism, or New Atheism as it is additionally labeled, is a form of atheism that rejects the paradigm of science and religion being two “separate, complementary, non-conflicting realms.” According to atheist and agnostic critics John Gray, Alain de Botton, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, and Bryan Appleyard, New Atheism can be described as “secular fundamentalist ... cult of intolerance.” De Botton, having written a book called *Religion for Atheists: a Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* where he argued for the importance of respecting and understanding religion, received threats, including that “he will be beaten up and his guts taken out of him” as well as getting an email that stated that he had “betrayed Atheism” and should “go over to the other side and die.” British intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking are two of the most famous New Atheists. Some of the major advocates of neo-atheism in the United States include neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris, philosopher and professor at Tufts University, Daniel Dennett, and the now deceased British-American writer Christopher Hitchens, who resided in America for over 25 years and wrote a biography of Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America*, claiming that Jefferson was an atheist.¹⁸⁸ Neo-atheism seems to have gained its strength during the same time period as neo-conservative evangelicalism, and the two competing ideologies accept the same fundamentalist premise; that one has to choose between religion and science because religion has to be interpreted in the fundamentalist-literal tradition, that religion and science are incompatible, and that only one of them tells the whole truth. For example, both neo-conservative evangelicals and New Atheists would agree that a Christian cannot believe in scientific theories such as the Big Bang or Evolution. According to Gary Wolf of *Wired Magazine*, the New Atheists have “branded even the mildest religious liberals as enablers of a vengeful mob. Everybody who does not join them is an ally of the Taliban.”¹⁸⁹

However, the vast majority of those who adhere to what Bill O'Reilly calls secular humanism and criticize the religious right are not neo-atheists, but rather moderate secularists who come from all faiths and want the public sphere to be religiously neutral so that no belief

¹⁸⁸ Bryan Appleyard, “The God wars,” in *The New Statesman*, February 28, 2012, accessed October 5, 2014. <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2012/02/neo-atheism-atheists-dawkins>

¹⁸⁹ Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers,” in *Wired Magazine*, issue 14.11, November 2006, accessed October 5, 2014. http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html?pg=7&topic=atheism&topic_set=

system is imposed upon anyone. Americans United for the Separation of Church and State is one such organization, with its president, Reverend Barry Lynn, being a minister in the First United Church of Christ. Americans United describe themselves in this way, with a clear reference to Thomas Jefferson:

Americans United for Separation of Church and State continues the struggle that Jefferson and the Baptists initiated back then. In my 30 years at Americans United, I have worked with Baptists, Catholics, Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Episcopalians, Humanists, Unitarians, Methodists and Presbyterians. Our membership runs the gamut from agnostics and atheists to Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Wiccans and the whole American panoply of viewpoints about religion. We disagree sharply about matters of faith, but – with Jefferson – we insist that every person has the constitutional right “to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason, and the serious convictions of his own inquiries.”¹⁹⁰

One specific example of secularists fighting for the separation of church and state is that of Jessica Ahlquist, a 16 year old student at Cranston High School West in Cranston, Rhode Island, who in January 2012 won a lawsuit to have a school prayer removed from the high school gymnasium, where it had been displayed on the wall since 1963, one year after teacher-led prayer in public schools was outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The prayer on the wall of the gymnasium read:

Our Heavenly Father.

Grant us each day the desire to do our best. To grow mentally and morally as well as physically. To be kind and helpful to our classmates and teachers. To be honest with ourselves as well as with others. Help us to be good sports and smile when we lose as well as when we win. Teach us the value of true friendship. Help us to always conduct ourselves so as to bring credit to Cranston High School West.

Amen.

Ahlquist, a former Catholic who lost faith in God and became an atheist at the age of ten, said that seeing the prayer displayed at her school made her feel like she didn't belong there. Supporting Ahlquist in her lawsuit was the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which

¹⁹⁰ Conn.

contributed \$13,000.¹⁹¹ Interestingly enough, Bill O'Reilly has named the Freedom from Religion Foundation as the "most aggressive" of the "three primary culprits seeking to diminish Christmas" and that the organization "routinely threatens to sue small towns and school districts if they dare utter the word 'Christmas' or allow choirs to sing carols in public schools."¹⁹² A year after the prayer was removed from the school's gymnasium, a secular inscription with a similar message, but without any reference to God, took its place:

Foster an atmosphere of good will and respect.
Affirm our efforts to conduct ourselves with honor.
Learn from our achievements and mistakes.
Choose wisely the paths taken and friends made.
Overcome prejudice and embrace diversity.
Nurture ourselves, families, friends and communities.
Strive for excellence in all our future endeavors.¹⁹³

This is a good example of one of the problematic areas of separation of church and state. Are public schools allowed to mention or display religion or religious ideas, even though they are not actively promoting them? There is definitely a gray area here and it has always been difficult for the courts as to where they should draw the line. Apparently, no one had ever been forced to recite the prayer at Cranston High School West, and most alumni did not even remember the prayer mural until Ahlquist started this recent debate over it. Donald Fox, a 1985 graduate from the school said that he was "more of a constitutionalist" but that in this case he found himself "strangely on the other side of this" and that to him "the prayer banner espouses nothing more than those values which we all hope for our children, no matter what school they attend or which religious background they hail from."¹⁹⁴ Fox's point is clear if one looks at the content in the secular version of the prayer.

The issue at hand in this specific case is whether or not Cranston High School West had embraced and promoted religion. Could the prayer mural be seen as an important piece of the school's history and background and kept as long as it was not used for leading

¹⁹¹ Abby Goodnough, "Student Faces Town's Wrath in Protest Against a Prayer," in *The New York Times*, January 26, 2012, accessed September 29, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/us/rhode-island-city-enraged-over-school-prayer-lawsuit.html?_r=2&

¹⁹² Erik Wemple, "Bill O'Reilly's war on Christmas: Good for atheists' business," in *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2013, accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/12/06/bill-oreillys-war-on-christmas-good-for-atheists-business/>

¹⁹³ Billy Hallowell, "Remember the Teen Atheist Who Battled for the Removal of Prayer Mural? There's An Update," in *The Blaze*, September 23, 2013, accessed October 5, 2014. <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/09/23/remember-the-teen-atheist-who-battled-for-the-removal-of-her-schools-prayer-mural-heres-the-secular-replacement/>

¹⁹⁴ Goodnough.

students in prayer? If public institutions cannot even display, mention or refer to anything religious, even though they are not actively promoting religion or forcing anyone to participate in religious activities, how can public schools teach history, art, music, and literature that refer to religion and demand an understanding of religion in order to be properly comprehended? There is perhaps sometimes a fine line between preserving a secular public sphere with religious neutrality and promoting atheism, which in itself should be considered a belief-system and therefore not to be actively supported by public institutions either. This is also why the courts have struggled and made different interpretations of the meaning of separation of church and state in various cases. There are no simple answers, and sometimes it is hard to balance the establishment clause and the free exercise clause.

The examples of conservative evangelicals running for school board elections in order to change curricula and the role of religion in public schools, while secularists and atheists are suing public schools when they feel that religion is being endorsed or propagated, shows that powerful individuals and interest groups on both sides of the Culture Wars are making huge efforts and spending vast sums of money to influence decisions. Clearly, what role religion has in American public life is essential to a great deal of people who are passionately engaged in promoting their views.

David Barton

One of the experts hired by the conservative faction of the Texas State Board of Education to advice on the new textbook standards was David Barton, the former vice-chairman for the Texas Republican Party and founder of the organization WallBuilders, which goal is to “exert a direct and positive influence in government, education, and the family by (1) educating the nation concerning the Godly foundation of our country; (2) providing information to federal, state, and local officials as they develop public policies which reflect Biblical values; and (3) encouraging Christians to be involved in the civic arena.”¹⁹⁵ Barton is considered one of the most influential evangelicals in America. According to John Fea, an evangelical Christian himself and chairman of the history department at the evangelical Messiah College, Barton is “peddling a distorted version of American history that appeals to conservative believers.” Furthermore, Fea says Barton is dangerous and that he is “in this for activism. He’s in this for

¹⁹⁵ “About Us,” *WallBuilders.com*, accessed September 10, 2014. <http://www.wallbuilders.com/ABTOverview.asp>

policy. He's in this to make changes to our culture."¹⁹⁶

Barton is the favorite historian of Glenn Beck, Fox News's notoriously provocative television and radio host and perhaps one of the most famous right wing television personalities. Having appeared on Beck's show several times as an "expert historian" even though he has virtually no formal education or training in history, Barton has become quite popular with some conservative evangelicals. Barton is the author of the highly controversial book *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson*. In the book, Barton deals with what he declares are seven lies about Jefferson. Five of these deal with Jefferson's views on religion. First of all, Barton claims that Jefferson did not found a secular university when he spearheaded the creation of the University of Virginia. Neither did Jefferson produce the *Jefferson Bible*. It was not meant to replace the Bible. It was simply a book where Jesus' moral teachings were compiled for Jefferson's own use and for the use of Christianizing the Indians, Barton claims.¹⁹⁷ Third, Jefferson never "advocated a secular public square through the separation of church and state."¹⁹⁸ Barton also disputes that Jefferson "detested the clergy."¹⁹⁹ Finally, Barton asserts that Jefferson was definitely a Christian for most of his life, whose "writings and statements on religious faith can be considered as nothing less than orthodox," but that Jefferson's "private personal theology and Christian faith in his last years might be questioned."²⁰⁰ In the process of trying to convince people that most of academia is wrong about Jefferson, Barton advises his readers to be highly skeptical of those who claim that Jefferson was a secularist who wanted church and state to be clearly separated. In regards to *The Jefferson Bible*, Barton claims that it doesn't really exist as such, but that any mention of it must come from "some recent Deconstructionist, Minimalist, Modernist, or Academic Collectivist source, but certainly not any original documentary source – for the very simple reason that no such source exists."²⁰¹

Barton's audience is mainly evangelical and conservative, but his work is less than well received among a group of conservative, Christian historians who have criticized his work for being ahistorical. Professors Warren Throckmorton and Michael Coulter of Grove City College, a Christian college in Pennsylvania, published the book *Getting Jefferson*

¹⁹⁶ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, "The Most Influential Evangelist You've Never Heard Of," in *All Things Considered*, NPR, August 9, 2012, accessed August 30, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2012/08/08/157754542/the-most-influential-evangelist-youve-never-heard-of>

¹⁹⁷ David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 83.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 115.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 141.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 168 and 192.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 83.

Right: Fact Checking Claims about Our Third President, where they assert that Barton's book is "guilty of taking statements and actions out of context and simplifying historical circumstances."²⁰² Noted historian Thomas Kidd at Baylor University wrote in the conservative evangelical *World Magazine*, that fellow conservative evangelical historians have criticized Barton for being "so eager to portray Jefferson as sympathetic to Christianity that he misses or omits obvious signs that Jefferson stood outside 'orthodox, creedal, confessional Christianity.'"²⁰³ Due to all the criticism and attention that *The Jefferson Lies* got, the publisher Thomas Nelson had a second round of reviews of it and decided to end the printing and distribution of the book, stating that "there were some historical details included in the book that were not adequately supported."²⁰⁴

In addition, Barton has written a booklet called *Separation of Church and State: What the Founders Meant* that he has published through his own organization, WallBuilders. In *Separation of Church and State*, Barton makes the argument that separation of church and state "was never intended to become a tool to secularize the public square" or keep religion out of government, but only to protect the free exercise of religion. Furthermore, Barton claims that the Founding Fathers "intended that Biblical principles be part of public society."²⁰⁵ Conservative Christian Rod Dreher criticized Barton's work as untruthful in *The American Conservative*:

Count me as a conservative Christian who is alarmed by this kind of thing. I hate it when secular liberals distort history to serve their own ends ... History will always be contended over, of course, but the goal should be trying to make the study of history an exercise in finding the truth, not massaging the past to make it fit a contemporary political narrative. When conservatives and Christians do this, we are no better than those we criticize. I don't want my children to learn politically correct history, from either the left or the right. You shouldn't either.²⁰⁶

Since David Barton has received harsh criticism from both liberal and conservative historians, it is clear that he is twisting history to make Jefferson in particular, and the Founders in general, fit in with present-day neo-conservative, evangelical views on religion

²⁰² Thomas Kidd, "The David Barton controversy" in *World Magazine*, August 7, 2012, accessed August 24, 2014. http://www.worldmag.com/2012/08/the_david_barton_controversy

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Thomas Kidd, "'Lost Confidence'" in *World Magazine*, August 9, 2012, accessed August 24, 2014. http://www.worldmag.com/2012/08/lost_confidence

²⁰⁵ David Barton, *Separation of Church and State: What the Founders Meant* (Aledo, TX: WallBuilder Press, 2007), 20.

²⁰⁶ Rod Dreher, "David Barton and Christianizing History," in *The American Conservative*, August 9, 2012, accessed August 31, 2014. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/david-barton-christianizing-history/>

and politics. Therefore it is highly interesting that the conservative bloc of the Texas State Board of Education chose Barton as an adviser and at the same time tried to remove Jefferson from the curriculum on great thinkers who inspired revolutions of the 18th and 19th century and replacing him with St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and William Blackstone. One possibility is that the conservatives on the board viewed Jefferson differently than Barton.

According to Texan physician Larry Dossey, the executive editor of *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* who is known for his propagation of spiritual and religious healing as part of traditional medicine, the “social conservatives” on the Texas State Board of Education “suspect Jefferson of being dangerously secular.” Furthermore, Dossey claims that the “conservative evangelical Christians want to demote Jefferson” because he believed that the Bible “is not inerrant.”²⁰⁷ Historian Matthew Crow supports this view, stating that “those seeking to walk back the American constitutional commitment to a ‘wall of separation between church and state’ understand that they need to do something with the figure of Thomas Jefferson.”²⁰⁸

As an expert reviewer of the new Social Studies curriculum standards for the Texas State Board of Education, Barton wrote in his Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Review that the most important knowledge students should take away from the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are these “five principles in government:”

1. There is a God.
2. There is a Creator.
3. The Creator gives to man certain inalienable rights.
4. Government exists primarily to protect God-given rights to every individual.
5. Below God-given rights and moral law, government is directed by the consent of the governed.²⁰⁹

Moreover, Barton goes on to elaborate on how these five Biblical principles of American government are the cornerstone to understanding American Exceptionalism:

Students must also understand the Framers’ very explicit (and very frequent) definition of inalienable rights as being those rights given by God to every individual,

²⁰⁷ Larry Dossey, “Stolen History: The Great Texas Textbook War,” in *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* (July/August 2011, Vol. 7, No. 4), 205-206.

²⁰⁸ Matthew Crow, “Why is Texas Afraid of Thomas Jefferson?” in *History News Network*, April 5, 2010, accessed September 10, 2014. <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/124527>

²⁰⁹ Barton, “Review of Current Social Studies TEKS” (*Texas Education Agency*, 2009), 11-12.

independent of any government anywhere ... These fundamental five precepts of American government must be thoroughly understood by students, but they are currently not addressed in the TEKS ... Students should understand that incorporating the five principles in government has resulted in what is called American Exceptionalism. They must know that not every nation experiences what Americans now routinely take for granted – that the prosperity, stability, and freedoms we enjoy are the direct products of specific ideas of government that we embrace – ideas not held by most other nations either then or now. Therefore, students must learn that they have a responsibility to defend and protect the fundamental ideas behind American Exceptionalism if they wish to continue enjoying the prosperity, stability, and freedoms to which we have become accustomed.²¹⁰

Barton's understanding of the founding documents and of American Exceptionalism is clearly in line with Chairman McLeroy's views, which he communicated to his Sunday school students.

Reinserting Jefferson

During the social studies hearings, Cynthia Dunbar came under pressure because she wanted to list John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, Charles de Montesquieu, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Sir William Blackstone as influential political philosophers “on political revolutions from 1750 to the present,” but leave out Thomas Jefferson. Dunbar later claimed that her “intent was in no way to strike at Jefferson, to minimize his impact” and that she loves Jefferson. “The problem,” says Dunbar, is that “enlightenment current day is understood from the viewpoint of the secular humanist ideology.” Furthermore, Dunbar claims that the French Revolution was a “secular humanistic” and “anti Judeo-Christian beliefs,” while the American Revolution was “what Jefferson put forward in the Declaration of Independence: The Laws of Nature and Nature's God.” Moreover, Dunbar stressed that Jefferson was included in many other parts of the curriculum.²¹¹ Thus, it seems like Dunbar and her allies wanted to leave Jefferson out of the standards related to political philosophy because he would then probably be seen as a secular humanist and promoter of the separation of church and state. Even though some neo-conservatives such as McLeroy, Dunbar, Barton, and Palin see Jefferson as a thinker that fits right into their ideology, they might at the same time realize that most others would not see him that way if his thoughts on religious freedom and the separation of church and state were included in the studying of revolutionary ideologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

²¹¹ *The Revisionaries*.

At the final adoption hearings on May 21, 2010, an amendment was suggested to strike John Calvin and insert Thomas Jefferson. This was voted down, but the conservative bloc could not prevent a compromise of adding Jefferson to the list while at the same time keeping Calvin.²¹² Later on, Don McLeroy lost his seat in the next Texas State Board of Education election, and was replaced on January 1, 2013 by Thomas Ratliff, a moderate Republican who disagrees with the religious right's attempts at changing curricula to fit with their ideology. Cynthia Dunbar chose to not run for re-election along with fellow right-winger Terri Leo, while two other members of the neo-conservative and religious right faction, Charlie Garza and Gail Lowe, lost their seats in the election.²¹³

Conclusion

What the Culture War battle over religion and education shows is that there are two competing visions for America that both try to influence how American history is told. It is essential both for conservatives and liberals to have the Founding Fathers on their side. That is why Thomas Jefferson plays a pivotal function in the Texas textbook war. First of all, the right wing demagogue David Barton has tried so hard to turn Jefferson into a figure that would fit with conservative evangelical views on politics and religion that a group of conservative Christian scholars felt the need to prove that Barton's work was flawed and clearly biased. Secondly, when the conservatives on the Texas State Board of Education realized that the Barton version of Jefferson simply would not make it into the textbook standards, they opted for removing him all together from the parts of the curriculum where Jefferson would do the most damage to a version of history that fits the views of the religious right. What the liberals on the board did, with the help of several liberal organizations promoting religious liberty and the separation of church and state, was to fight to keep Jefferson. Furthermore, the liberals on the board also fought to stop many other attempts of presenting a conservatively biased version of history in the new standards.

The result of the Texas textbook war seems to be that for the most part moderate Republicans and conservatives less driven by the desire to politicize the curriculum have taken the place of the leading neo-conservatives, most noticeably Don McLeroy and Cynthia Dunbar. Consequently, the highly politically polarized battle over what the American Creed is all about seems to be mostly over for now in Texas. Hopefully, a more objective and well-

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ "Another Big Setback for the Far Right on Texas State Board of Education" in *TFN Insider*, November 12, 2012, accessed October 8, 2014. <http://tfninsider.org/2012/11/07/another-big-setback-for-the-far-right-on-texas-state-board-of-education/>

rounded approach will be taken by everyone involved next time the social studies textbook standards are up for revision.

In other struggles, such as the example from Cranston High School West in Rhode Island or some of the attitudes of certain neo-atheists towards religion, it is clear that sometimes a secular, atheist belief system can also be forced upon people in the public square. The history of religion and public education in the United States shows that teaching about anything related to religion can potentially be very problematic. Even within Christianity, different denominations have opposing views, customs, and interpretations that made it very difficult to promote a generic form of Christianity in public schools. However, the solution could be for public schools to teach about religion, but not promoting any specific beliefs, as Prothero suggests and what has been successfully done in Modesto, California.

Overall, Thomas Jefferson plays an important role in these debates. Conservatives and liberals disagree on what the Founding Fathers intended when it came to religion, and they disagree on what Jefferson meant by the “wall of separation between church and state.” In the realm of public education, the goal must be to present an accurate as possible story of the founding of America and of Jefferson’s contributions to the American Creed. However, what the American Revolution should continue to mean for Americans today and in the future is up for debate. It is the Culture War struggle to define what the American Creed should result in when it comes to public education that keeps many conservatives and liberals gridlocked in polarization. In an ever increasingly diverse and multicultural society, though, understanding and respect for the views and practices of others – without forcing one’s own on others and without contributing to pointless polarization – does seem like a path desirable to many Americans.

CHAPTER 5

Final Reflections

In the book *What's The Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Thomas Frank argues that right wing conservatives have managed to move many ordinary Americans towards the right wing of American politics – which does not make much sense for most working or middle class citizens at least economically – by appealing to moral and religious issues. Frank describes the Presidential Election of 2004 as being turned into a moral election over values by the right wingers, which “for the conservative rank and file was a culture-war Armageddon, and they were battling for the Lord.”²¹⁴ In this sense, the moral issues presented by right wing politicians as vitally important to the future of America are so central to many Americans that these issues trump everything else. The rise of the Tea Party movement in the wake of Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 Presidential Election can be seen as an escalation of the right wing conservative expansion among many Americans as described by Frank.

Furthermore, American politics have become more polarized than in a long time during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Gary C. Jacobson describes two different ways of thinking about society and politics in America as “authoritarian” and “nonauthoritarian.” By this, Jacobson means that authoritarians “tend to hold authorities in high regard,” like the Bible, the Constitution, and what they believe to be legitimate leaders. Nonauthoritarians, on the other hand, “tend to be more tolerant of ambiguity and more comfortable with difference,” and to “prefer nuanced thinking.”²¹⁵ Moreover, he argues that to Tea Party people, President Obama represents everything that is wrong with America: “Obama would not merely be on the wrong side of political issues, but his race, upbringing, mentality, associations, and presumed values would place him outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in an American leader.”²¹⁶ In addition, Jacobson points out, as much as “three-quarters of Tea Party supporters think Obama does not share the values most Americans try to live by.”²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Picador, 2005), 255.

²¹⁵ Gary C. Jacobson, “Polarization, Public Opinion, and the Presidency: The Obama and Anti-Obama Coalitions,” in *The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects* edited by Bert A. Rockman et al (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012), 102.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 103.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 106.

Thus, present-day America is clearly polarized and fits very well with Hunter's theory of the Culture Wars. Since 2011, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and President Obama's unwillingness to cooperate with each other is just one good example. This polarization also applies to the understanding and interpretation of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers, just as Lepore and Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn illustrate. The role of religion in American society consequently becomes a natural battleground between conservatives and liberals.

Certain elements of Jefferson's understanding of religious freedom and the separation of church and state can definitely be debated and there are not clear answers to everything. However, to argue that Jefferson was a firm believer in a Christian state, as Barton and other neo-conservatives do, is simply not the case. Jefferson's effort to establish freedom of religion is particularly evident in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which in turn laid the foundation for the religious freedom guaranteed in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which was penned and put forth by Jefferson's fellow Virginian, close friend, and political ally, James Madison. It is well known that Thomas Jefferson was an advocate for individual liberty in general, but when it came to religion he was perhaps the most enthusiastic in protecting the rights of the individual from any coercion from a powerful state or church. Additionally, as president, Jefferson did not want to get the federal government or the presidency to get involved in any religious activities, thus setting a practical precedent for the principle of separation and church and state.

Furthermore, Peter Onuf stresses that the "modern conception of the United States as a 'Christian nation' would have appalled Jefferson, the 'apostle of reason' and sworn enemy of unreasoning faith." At the same time, however, "Jefferson himself can in some measure be held responsible for the modern version of this idea." In Onuf's opinion, Jefferson "believed that the moral and religious progress of the republic was essential to its very survival." Even more so, it was the separation between the "private domain of the self, where virtue was cultivated and self-mastery achieved, and the public world that virtuous individuals collectively constituted" that was the most essential part of separation of church and state. The separation between "religion (morality, ethics) and politics," on the other hand, "were inextricably linked." Thus, Jefferson did not want the United States to be Christian nation, but at the same time he saw Christian morality as important to virtue and did not seem to

have a problem with allowing for the free exercise of religion in public buildings: “Jefferson sanctioned what would now be seen as a violation of a strict church-state separation.”²¹⁸

Consequently, the Jeffersonian legacy makes it clear that Thomas Jefferson did not think that the United States was a Christian nation. Jefferson – no matter what religious beliefs he held privately or how important he thought the morals of Jesus were – firmly believed in a secular government that did not interfere in the citizens’ religious activities in any way. In other words, Jefferson held an opinion on the matter of religious freedom that falls right in line with the First Amendment, namely that the government should not actively support or promote religion, nor should the government be of hindrance to the free practice of any religion. Therefore, one would have to conclude that Thomas Jefferson – although he was a Christian in his own way and considered the morals of Jesus as essential for a virtuous citizenry – contributed so much to the creation of a secular government and the principle of separation between church and state that he cannot be considered the champion of a Christian nation with a Christian people.

Nevertheless, the apparent need that some have to follow exactly what the Founders originally intended seems peculiar. First of all, the Founding Fathers were a group of men who held different views on all sorts of issues, and the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as founding documents were both the results of compromises after long and difficult debates. Secondly, many of the Founders – especially Thomas Jefferson – believed that the Constitution was a living document that would obviously change with the times. Jefferson himself wrote:

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the arc of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well; I belonged to it, and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. It was very like the present, but without the experience of the present; and forty years of experience in government is worth a century of book-reading; and this they would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead. I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws and constitutions. I think moderate imperfections had better be borne with; because, when once known, we accommodate ourselves to them, and find practical means of correcting their ill effects. But I know also, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when

²¹⁸ Onuf, 159-160.

a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.²¹⁹

Such criticism of those who are bound by conservative interpretations of constitutions echoes the modern criticism of how representatives of the religious right interpret the U.S. Constitution in the same way they interpret the Bible.

Conclusion

In present-day America, Thomas Jefferson certainly has the position of a national icon that appeals to many different parts of society. The debate over religious freedom and separation of church and state issues, such as the War on Christmas and religion in public education, shows that very different groups are calling upon Jefferson and claiming that he is on their side. The religious right, Christian liberals, fundamentalist atheists, and secularists of various religious and non-religious backgrounds all refer to Jefferson when arguing over what role religion should play in the public square. The American Creed is important to all of these groups, and that is probably why they want the Founders on their side, as if they are continuing the work of the Revolution the way it should be done. But how is it possible to have such different interpretations of Jefferson? Peter Onuf puts it this way:

Jefferson, the self-professed ‘Christian’ who rejected the faith of the fathers, speaks to us in (at least) two voices, one ebulliently confident in a glorious Christian future, the other chronically anxious about assaults on individual liberty and autonomy, ever alert about the dangers of priestcraft. But Jefferson’s supposedly split personality is nothing more or less than a function of anachronism, of our continuing need to enlist him in our own enterprises. When we look closely at Jefferson (if we look beyond ourselves), we can begin to glimpse the many complex and ambiguous possibilities – the many futures – that were inherent in his world and that have played out, and are still playing out, in ours.²²⁰

What both the War on Christmas and the conflicts over education show is that Jefferson, in Onuf’s words, keep speaking to us in two very different voices in the Culture Wars; the secular and progressive voice and the conservative Christian voice. Furthermore, at least one other Jeffersonian voice protrudes in the debate; the moderate voice that tries to balance the conflict and calm things down. Perhaps it is this voice that appeals to most

²¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 1401.

²²⁰ Onuf, 161.

Americans. A voice that fits into Fiorina's critique of Hunter's theory of the Culture Wars, but is being drowned out by the polarized forces of fundamentalist atheists and neo-conservative Christians.

Furthermore, the polarized understanding of Jefferson seems to have left facts and academic inquiry behind. Demagogues such as Damon Vix and David Barton are excellent examples of how both sides of the issue simply twist facts in order to present skewed versions of the history of the Founding of America and interpretations of Jefferson's views on religion and separation of church and state that simply have no basis in critical, scholarly work. Parts of American media back this up, with Fox News and MSNBC being the worst representatives of a clear polarization of news networks where neutrality and objectivity has gone completely out the window.

One thing is clear: The role of religion in society and the relationship between government and religion is not a matter that has a simple solution. What does it actually mean to establish religion? Can the government not even get indirectly involved in any religious matters? And in some cases, cannot well-intentioned attempts at making sure the government does not endorse or promote religion lead to prohibiting the free exercise of religion in the public sphere? In a society that has freedom of religion and the separation of church and state as essential ideals while at the same time having large groups of religiously active citizens, the competing desires of the freedom to exercise ones religion without hindrance and the freedom from what can be seen as attempts of religious indoctrination are bound to come into conflict.

When it comes to the Culture War debate over what freedom of religion means and what role religion should play in public life in America, the most apparent divider is between those who believe that the United States is first and foremost a Christian nation and those who believe that it is a secular country. In a way, both sides are right. Each side of the argument has its valid points. If one looks at the official, government structure of the United States, the country is clearly secular. However, such a classification is somewhat limited, as it would lead to the conclusion that European countries such as England or Denmark with their state churches are intrinsically more Christian than the United States of America. Obviously, since Americans are more religiously active and feel that religion is more important than any other developed country, American society must be – at least in some ways – more religious than any European society. At the same time, nevertheless, the United States has a long tradition of religious pluralism and is probably the country in the world with the most variation in sheer numbers of different creeds and belief systems.

The Founding Fathers, and Thomas Jefferson in particular, wanted to create a nation where people were free to believe anything they wanted. This concept applies to political, philosophical, as well as religious questions. When it comes to religion, Jefferson put it this way: “But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”²²¹ Therefore, it must be clear that neither the religious right nor the secular fundamentalists – or anyone else, for that matter – can have their way in imposing their views and practices on others. In other words, the public sphere cannot be obligatorily religious or non-religious, but must allow for the free practice of religion as well as agnosticism and atheism, while at the same time ensuring that no religious or non-religious doctrine becomes an established and government-supported belief system. If Jeffersonian religious liberty is going to work in practice, it will require virtuous and enlightened citizens.

²²¹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* in *Writings* by Thomas Jefferson, 285.

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